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WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE

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ASTOR, LENOX AND
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FLOUNDERING ON FOOT BESIDE THEM HE URGED THE TEAM THROUGH THE POWDERY DRIFTS.

WINSTON *of the* PRAIRIE

By HAROLD BINDLOSS

Author of "Alton of Somasco," "The Cattle-Baron's Daughter," "The Dust of Conflict," etc.

With Illustrations in Color by
W. HERBERT DUNTON

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WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE

WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE

CHAPTER I

RANCHER WINSTON

IT was a bitter night, for the frost had bound the prairie in its iron grip, although as yet there was no snow. Rancher Winston stood shivering in a little Canadian settlement in the great lonely land which runs north from the American frontier to Athabasca. There was no blink of starlight in the murky sky, and out of the great waste of grass came a stinging wind that moaned about the frame houses clustering beside the trail that led south over the limited levels to the railroad and civilization. It chilled Winston, and his furs, somewhat tattered, gave him little protection. He strode up and down, glancing expectantly into the darkness, and then across the unpaved street, where the ruts were plowed a foot deep in the prairie sod, towards the warm red glow from the windows of the wooden hotel. He knew that the rest of the outlying farmers and ranchers who had ridden in for their letters were sitting snug about the stove, but it was customary for all who sought shelter there to pay for their share of the six o'clock supper, and the half-dollar Winston had then in his pocket was required for other purposes.

He had also retained through all his struggles a measure of his pride, and because of it strode up and down buffeted by the blasts until a beat of horsehoofs came out of the darkness and was followed by a rattle of wheels. It grew steadily louder, a blinking ray of

brightness flickered across the frame houses, and presently dark figures were silhouetted against the light on the hotel veranda as a lurching wagon drew up beneath it. Two dusky objects, shapeless in their furs, sprang down, and one stumbled into the post office close by with a bag, while the other man answered the questions hurled at him as he fumbled with stiffened fingers at the harness.

"Late? Well, you might be thankful you've got your mail at all," he said. "We had to go round by Willow Bluff, and didn't think we'd get through the ford. Ice an inch thick, any way, and Charley talked that much he's not said anything since, even when the near horse put his foot into a badger hole."

Rude banter followed this, but Winston took no part in it. Hastening into the post office, he stood betraying his impatience by his very impassiveness while a sallow-faced woman tossed the letters out upon the counter. At last she took up two of them, and the man's fingers trembled a little as he stretched out his hand when she said:

"That's all there are for you."

Winston recognized the writing on the envelopes, and it was with difficulty he held his eagerness in check, but other men were waiting for his place, and he went out and crossed the street to the hotel where there was light to read by. As he entered it a girl bustling about a long table in the big stove-warmed room turned with a little smile.

"It's only you!" she said. "Now I was figuring it was Lance Courthorne."

Winston, impatient as he was, stopped and laughed, for the hotel-keeper's daughter was tolerably well-favored and a friend of his.

"And you're disappointed?" he said. "I haven't Lance's good looks, or his ready tongue."

The room was empty, for the guests were thronging about the post office then, and the girl's eyes twinkled as she drew back a pace and surveyed the man. There was nothing in his appearance that would have aroused a stranger's interest, or attracted more than a passing glance, as he stood before her in a very old fur coat, with a fur cap that was in keeping with it held in his hand.

His face had been bronzed almost to the color of a Blackfeet Indian's by frost and wind and sun, but it was of English type from the crisp fair hair above the broad forehead to the somewhat solid chin. The mouth was hidden by the bronze-tinted mustache, and the eyes alone were noticeable. They were gray, and there was a steadiness in them which was almost unusual even in that country where men look into long distances. For the rest, he was of average stature, and stood impassively straight, looking down upon the girl, without either grace or awkwardness, while his hard brown hands suggested, as his attire did, strenuous labor for a very small reward.

"Well," said the girl, with Western frankness, "there's a kind of stamp on Lance that you haven't got. I figure he brought it with him from the old country. Still, one might take you for him if you stood with the light behind you, and you're not quite a bad-looking man. It's a kind of pity you're so solemn."

Winston smiled. "I don't fancy that's astonishing after losing two harvests in succession," he said. "You see there's nobody back there in the old country to send remittances to me."

The girl nodded with quick sympathy. "Oh, yes.

The times are bad," she said. "Well, you read your letters, I'm not going to worry you."

Winston sat down and opened the first envelope under the big lamp. It was from a land agent and mortgage broker, and his face grew a trifle grimmer as he read, "In the present condition of the money market your request that we should carry you over is unreasonable, and we regret that unless you can extinguish at least half the loan we will be compelled to foreclose upon your holding."

There was a little more of it, but that was sufficient for Winston, who knew it meant disaster, and it was with the feeling of one clinging desperately to the last shred of hope he tore open the second envelope. The letter it held was from a friend he had made in a Western city, and once entertained for a month at his ranch, but the man had evidently sufficient difficulties of his own to contend with.

"Very sorry, but it can't be done," he wrote. "I'm loaded up with wheat nobody will buy, and couldn't raise five hundred dollars to lend any one just now."

Winston sighed a little, but when he rose and slowly straightened himself nobody would have suspected he was looking ruin in the face. He had fought a slow losing battle for six weary years, holding on doggedly though defeat appeared inevitable, and now when it had come he bore it impassively, for the struggle which, though he was scarcely twenty-six, had crushed all mirth and brightness out of his life, had given him endurance in place of them. Just then a man came bustling towards him, with the girl, who bore a tray, close behind.

"What are you doing with that coat on?" he said. "Get it off and sit down right there. The boys are about through with the mail and supper's ready."

Winston glanced at the steaming dishes hungrily, for he had passed most of the day in the bitter frost, eating very little, and there was still a drive of twenty miles before him.

"It is time I was taking the trail," he said.

He was sensible of a pain in his left side, which, as other men have discovered, not infrequently follows enforced abstinence from food, but he remembered what he wanted the half-dollar in his pocket for. The hotel-keeper had possibly some notion of the state of affairs, for he laughed a little.

"You've got to sit down," he said. "Now, after the way you fixed me up when I stopped at your ranch, you don't figure I'd let you go before you had some supper with me?"

Winston may have been unduly sensitive, but he shook his head. "You're very good, but it's a long ride, and I'm going now," he said. "Good-night, Nettie."

He turned as he spoke, with the swift decision that was habitual with him, and when he went out the girl glanced at her father reproachfully.

"You always get spoiling things when you put your hand in," she said. "Now that man's hungry, and I'd have fixed it so he'd have got his supper if you had left it to me."

The hotel-keeper laughed a little. "I'm kind of sorry for Winston because there's grit in him, and he's never had a show," he said. "Still, I figure he's not worth your going out gunning after, Nettie."

The girl said nothing, but there was a little flush in her face which had not been there before, when she busied herself with the dishes.

In the meanwhile Winston was harnessing two bronco horses to a very dilapidated wagon. They were vicious

beasts, but he had bought them cheap from a man who had some difficulty in driving them, while the wagon had been given him, when it was apparently useless, by a neighbor. The team had, however, already covered thirty miles that day, and started homewards at a steady trot without the playful kicking they usually indulged in. Here and there a man sprang clear of the rutted road, but Winston did not notice him or return his greeting. He was abstractedly watching the rude frame houses flit by, and wondering, while the pain in his side grew keener, when he would get his supper, for it happens not infrequently that the susceptibilities are dulled by a heavy blow, and the victim finds a distraction that is almost welcome in the endurance of a petty trouble.

Winston was very hungry, and weary alike in body and mind. The sun had not risen when he left his homestead, and he had passed the day under a nervous strain, hoping, although it seemed improbable, that the mail would bring him relief from his anxieties. Now he knew the worst, he could bear it as he had borne the loss of two harvests, and the disaster which followed in the wake of the blizzard that killed off his stock; but it seemed unfair that he should endure cold and hunger too, and when one wheel sank into a rut and the jolt shook him in every stiffened limb, he broke out with a hoarse expletive. It was his first protest against the fate that was too strong for him, and almost as he made it he laughed.

"Pshaw! There's no use kicking against what has to be, and I've got to keep my head just now," he said.

There was no great comfort in the reflection, but it had sustained him before, and Winston's head was a somewhat exceptional one, though there was as a rule nothing in any way remarkable about his conversation,

and he was apparently merely one of the many quietly-spoken, bronze-faced men who are even by their blunders building up a great future for the Canadian dominion. He accordingly drew his old rug tighter round him, and instinctively pulled his fur cap lower down when the lights of the settlement faded behind him and the creaking wagon swung out into the blackness of the prairie. It ran back league beyond league across three broad provinces, and the wind that came up out of the great emptiness emphasized its solitude. A man from the cities would have heard nothing but the creaking of the wagon and the drumming fall of hoofs, but Winston heard the grasses patter as they swayed beneath the bitter blasts stiff with frost, and the moan of swinging boughs in a far-off willow bluff. It was these things that guided him, for he had left the rutted trail, and here and there the swish beneath the wheels told of taller grass, while the bluff ran black athwart the horizon when that had gone. Then twigs crackled beneath them as the horses picked their way amidst the shadowy trees stunted by a ceaseless struggle with the wind, and Winston shook the creeping drowsiness from him when they came out into the open again, for he knew it is not advisable for any man with work still to do to fall asleep under the frost of that country.

Still, he grew a trifle dazed as the miles went by, and because of it indulged in memories he had shaken off at other times. They were blurred recollections of the land he had left eight years ago, pictures of sheltered England, half-forgotten music, the voices of friends who no longer remembered him, and the smiles in a girl's bright eyes. Then he settled himself more firmly in the driving seat, and with numbed fingers sought a tighter grip of the reins as the memory of the girl's soft answer

to a question he had asked brought his callow ambitions back.

He was to hew his way to fortune in the West, and then come back for her, but the girl who had clung to him with wet cheeks when he left her had apparently grown tired of waiting, and Winston sent back her letters in return for a silver-printed card. That was six years ago, and now none of the dollars he had brought into the country remained to him. He realized, dispassionately and without egotism, that this was through no fault of his, for he knew that better men had been crushed and beaten.

It was, however, time he had done with these reflections, for while he sat half-dazed and more than half-frozen the miles had been flitting by, and now the team knew they were not very far from home. Little by little their pace increased, and Winston was almost astonished to see another bluff black against the night ahead of him. As usual in that country, the willows and birches crawled up the sides and just showed their heads above the sinuous crest of a river hollow. It was very dark when the wagon lurched in among them, and it cost the man an effort to discern the winding trail which led down into the blackness of the hollow. In places the slope was almost precipitous, and it behooved him to be careful of the horses, which could not be replaced. Without them he could not plow in spring, and his life did not appear of any especial value in comparison with theirs just then.

The team, however, were evidently bent on getting home as soon as possible, and Winston's fingers were too stiff to effectively grasp the reins. A swinging bough also struck one of the horses, and when it plunged and flung up its head the man reeled a little in his seat. Before he recovered the team were going down-hill at a

gallop. Winston flung himself bodily backwards with tense muscles and the reins slipping a trifle in his hands, knowing that though he bore against them with all his strength the team were leaving the trail. Then the wagon jolted against a tree, one horse stumbled, picked up its stride, and went on at a headlong gallop. The man felt the wind rush past him and saw the dim trees whirl by, but he could only hold on and wonder what would take place when they came to the bottom. The bridge the trail went round by was some distance to his right, and because the frost had just set in he knew the ice on the river would not bear the load even if the horses could keep their footing.

He had not, however, long to wonder. Once more a horse stumbled, there was a crash, and a branch hurled Winston backwards into the wagon, which came to a standstill suddenly. When he rose something warm was running down his face, and there was a red smear on the hand he lighted the lantern with. When that was done he flung himself down from the wagon dreading what he would find. The flickering radiance showed him that the pole had snapped, and while one bronco still stood trembling on its feet the other lay inert amidst a tangle of harness. The man's face grew a trifle grimmer as he threw the light upon it, and then stooping glanced at one doubled leg. It was evident that fate which did nothing by halves had dealt him a crushing blow. The last faint hope he clung to had vanished now.

He was, however, a humane man, and considerate of the beasts that worked for him, and accordingly thrust his hand inside the old fur coat when he had loosed the uninjured horse, and drew out a long-bladed knife. Then he knelt, and setting down the lantern, felt for the place to strike. When he found it his courage almost deserted

him, and meeting the eyes that seemed to look up at him with dumb appeal, turned his head away. Still, he was a man who would not shirk a painful duty, and shaking off the sense of revulsion turned again and stroked the beast's head.

"It's all I can do for you," he said.

Then his arm came down and a tremor ran through the quivering frame, while Winston set his lips tightly as his hand grew warm. The thing was horrible to him, but the life he led had taught him the folly of weakness, and he was too pitiful to let his squeamishness overcome him.

Still, he shivered when it was done, and rubbing the knife in the withered leaves, rose, and made shift to gird a rug about the uninjured horse. Then he cut the reins and tied them, and mounting without stirrups rode towards the bridge. The horse went quietly enough now, and the man allowed it to choose its way. He was going home to find shelter from the cold, because his animal instincts prompted him, but otherwise almost without volition, in a state of dispassionate indifference. Nothing more, he fancied, could well befall him.

CHAPTER II

LANCE COURTHORNE

IT was late when Winston reached his log-built house, but he set out once more with his remaining horse before the lingering daylight crept out of the east to haul the wagon home. He also spent most of the day in repairing it, because occupation of any kind that would keep him from unpleasant reflections appeared advisable, and to allow anything to fall out of use was distasteful to him, although as the wagon had been built for two horses he had little hope of driving it again. It was a bitter, gray day with a low, smoky sky, and seemed very long to Winston, but evening came at last, and he was left with nothing between him and his thoughts.

He lay in a dilapidated chair beside the stove, and the little bare room through which its pipe ran was permeated with the smell of fresh shavings, hot iron, and the fumes of indifferent tobacco. A carpenter's bench ran along one end of it, and was now occupied by a new wagon pole the man had fashioned out of a slender birch. A Marlin rifle, an ax, and a big saw hung beneath the head of an antelope on the wall above the bench, and all of them showed signs of use and glistened with oil. Opposite to them a few shelves were filled with simple crockery and cooking utensils, and these also shone spotlessly. There was a pair of knee boots in one corner with a patch partly sewn on to one of them, and the harness in another showed traces of careful repair. A bookcase hung above them, and its somewhat tattered

contents indicated that the man who had chosen and evidently handled them frequently, possessed tastes any one who did not know that country would scarcely have expected to find in a prairie farmer. A table and one or two rude chairs made by their owner's hands completed the furniture, but while all hinted at poverty, it also suggested neatness, industry and care, for the room bore the impress of its occupier's individuality as rooms not infrequently do.

It was not difficult to see that he was frugal, though possibly from necessity rather than taste, not sparing of effort, and had a keen eye for utility, and if that suggested the question why with such capacities he had not attained to greater comfort the answer was simple. Winston had no money, and the seasons had fought against him. He had done his uttermost with the means at his disposal, and now he knew he was beaten.

A doleful wind moaned about the lonely building, and set the roof shingles rattling overhead. Now and then the stove crackled, or the lamp flickered, and any one unused to the prairie would have felt the little loghouse very desolate and lonely. There was no other human habitation within a league, only a great waste of whitened grass relieved about the homestead by the raw clods of the fall plowing, for, while his scattered neighbors for the most part put their trust in horses and cattle, Winston had been among the first to realize the capacities of that land as a wheat-growing country.

Now, clad in well-worn jean trousers and an old deerskin jacket, he looked down at the bundle of documents on his knee, accounts unpaid, a banker's intimation that no more checks would be honored, and a mortgage deed. They were not pleasant reading, and the man's face clouded as he penciled notes on some of them, but

there was no weakness or futile protest in it. Defeat was plain between the lines of all he read, but he was going on stubbornly until the struggle was ended, as others of his kind had done, there at the western limit of the furrows of the plow and in the great province farther east which is one of the world's granaries. They went under and were forgotten, but they showed the way, and while their guerdon was usually six feet of prairie soil, the wheatfields, mills, and railroads came, for it is written plainly on the new Northwest that no man may live and labor for himself alone, and there are many who realizing it instinctively ask very little and freely give their best for the land that but indifferently shelters them.

Presently, however, there was a knocking at the door, and though this was most unusual Winston only quietly moved his head when a bitter blast came in, and a man wrapped in furs stood in the opening.

"I'll put my horse in the stable while I've got my furs on. It's a bitter night," he said.

Winston nodded. "You know where the lantern is," he said. "There's some chop in the manger, and you needn't spare the oats in the bin. At present prices it doesn't pay to haul them in."

The man closed the door silently, and it was ten minutes before he returned and, sloughing off his furs, dropped into a chair beside the stove. "I got supper at Broughton's, and don't want anything but shelter to-night," he said. "Shake that pipe out, and try one of these instead."

He laid a cigar case on the table, and though well worn it was of costly make with a good deal of silver about it, while Winston, who lighted one, knew that the cigars were good. He had no esteem for his visitor, but

men are not censorious upon the prairie, and Western hospitality is always free.

"Where have you come from, Courthorne?" he said quietly.

The other man laughed a little. "The long trail," he said. "The Dakotas, Colorado, Montana. Cleaned up one thousand dollars at Regent, and might have got more, but some folks down there seemed tired of me. The play was quite regular, but they have apparently been getting virtuous lately."

"And now?" said Winston, with polite indifference.

Courthorne made a little gesture of deprecation.

"I'm back again with the rustlers."

Winston's nod signified comprehension, for the struggle between the great range-holders across the frontier and the smaller settlers who with legal right invaded their cattle runs was just over. It had been fought out bitterly with dynamite and rifles, and when at last with the aid of the United States cavalry peace was made, sundry broken men and mercenaries who had taken the pay of both parties, seeing their occupation gone, had found a fresh scope for their energies in smuggling liquor, and on opportunity transferring cattle, without their owner's sanction, across the frontier. That was then a prohibition country, and the profits and risks attached to supplying it and the Blackfeet on the reserves with liquor were heavy.

"Business this way?" said Winston.

Courthorne appeared to consider a moment, and there was a curious little glint in his eyes which did not escape his companion's attention, but he laughed.

"Yes, we're making a big run," he said, then stopped and looked straight at the rancher. "Did it ever strike you, Winston, that you were not unlike me?"

Winston smiled, but made a little gesture of dissent as he returned the other's gaze. They were about the same height and had the same English type of face, while Winston's eyes were gray and his companion's an indefinite blue that approached the former color, but there the resemblance, which was not more than discernible, ended. Winston was quietly-spoken and somewhat grim, a plain prairie farmer in appearance, while a vague but recognizable stamp of breeding and distinction still clung to Courthorne. He would have appeared more in place in the States upon the southern Atlantic seaboard, where the characteristics the Cavalier settlers brought with them are not extinct, than he did upon the Canadian prairie. His voice had even in his merriment a little imperious ring, his face was refined as well as sensual, and there was a languid gracefulness in his movements and a hint of pride in his eyes. They, however, lacked the steadiness of Winston's, and there were men who had seen the wild devil that was born in Courthorne look out of them. Winston knew him as a pleasant companion, but surmised from stories he had heard that there were men, and more women, who bitterly rued the trust they had placed in him.

"No," he said dryly. "I scarcely think I am like you, although only last night Nettie at the settlement took me for you. You see, the kind of life I've led out here has set its mark on me, and my folks in the old country were distinctly middle-class people. There is something in heredity."

Courthorne did not parry the unexpressed question. "Oh yes," he said, with a little sardonic smile. "I know. The backbone of the nation—solemn, virtuous and slow. You're like them, but my folks were different, as you surmise. I don't think they had many esti-

mable qualities from your point of view, but if they all didn't go quite straight they never went slow, and they had a few prejudices, which is why I found it advisable to leave the old country. Still, I've had my fill of all that life can offer most folks out here, while you scarcely seem to have found virtue pay you. They told me at the settlement things were bad with you."

Winston, who was usually correct in his deductions, surmised that his companion had an object, and expected something in return for this confidence. There was also no need for reticence when every farmer in the district knew all about his affairs, while something urged him to follow Courthorne's lead.

"Yes," he said quietly. "They are. You see, when I lost my cattle in the blizzard, I had to sell out or mortgage the place to the hilt, and during the last two years I haven't made the interest. The loan falls due in August, and they're going to foreclose on me."

"Then," said Courthorne, "what is keeping you here when the result of every hour's work you put in will go straight into another man's pocket?"

Winston smiled a little. "In the first place, I've nowhere else to go, and there's something in the feeling that one has held on to the end. Besides, until a few days ago I had a vague hope that by working double tides, I might get another crop in. Somebody might have advanced me a little on it because the mortgage only claims the house and land."

Courthorne looked at him curiously. "No. We are not alike," he said. "There's a slow stubborn devil in you, Winston, and I think I'd be afraid of you if I ever did you an injury. But go on."

"There's very little more. My team ran away down the ravine, and I had to put one beast out of its misery.

I can't do my plowing with one horse, and that leaves me stranded for the want of the dollars to buy another with. It's usually a very little thing that turns the scale, but now the end has come, I don't know that I'm sorry. I've never had a good time, you see, and the struggle was slowly crushing the life out of me."

Winston spoke quietly, without bitterness, but Courthorne, who had never striven at all but stretched out his hand and taken what was offered, the more willingly when it was banned alike by judicial and moral law, dimly understood him. He was a fearless man, but he knew his courage would not have been equal to the strain of that six years' struggle against loneliness, physical fatigue, and adverse seasons, during which disaster followed disaster. He looked at the bronzed farmer as he said, "Still, you would do a little in return for a hundred dollars that would help you to go on with the fight?"

A faint sparkle crept into Winston's eyes. It was not hope, but rather the grim anticipation of the man offered a better weapon when standing with his back to the wall.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I would do almost anything."

"Even if it was against the law?"

Winston sat silent for almost a minute, but there was no indecision in his face, which slightly perplexed Courthorne. "Yes," he said. "Though I kept it while I could, the law was made for the safe-guarding of prosperous men, but with such as I am it is every man for his own hand and the devil to care for the vanquished. Still, there is a reservation."

Courthorne nodded. "It's unlawful, but not against the unwritten code."

"Well," said Winston quietly. "When you tell me what you want I should have a better opinion."

Courthorne laughed a little, though there was something unpleasant in his eyes. "When I first came out to this country I should have resented that," he said. "Now, it seems to me that I'm putting too much in your hands if I make the whole thing clear before you commit yourself in any way."

Winston nodded. "In fact, you have got to trust me. You can do so safely."

"The assurance of the guileless is astonishing and occasionally hard to bear," said Courthorne. "Why not reverse the position?"

Winston's gaze was steady, and free from embarrassment. "I am," he said, "waiting for your offer."

"Then," said Courthorne dryly, "here it is. We are running a big load through to the northern settlements and the reserves to-morrow, and while there's a good deal of profit attached to the venture, I have a notion that Sergeant Stimson has had word of it. Now, the Sergeant knows just how I stand with the rustlers though he can fasten no charge on me, and he will have several of his troopers looking out for me. Well, I want one of them to see and follow me south along the Montana trail. There's no horse in the Government service can keep pace with that black of mine, but it would not be difficult to pull him and just keep the trooper out of carbine-shot behind. When he finds he can't overtake the black, he'll go off for his comrades, and the boys will run our goods across the river while they're picking up the trail."

"You mentioned the horse, but not yourself," said Winston quietly.

Courthorne laughed. "Yes," he said. "I will not

be there. I'm offering you one hundred dollars to ride the black for me. You can put my furs on, and anybody who saw you and knew the horse would certify it was me."

"And where will you be?"

"Here," said Courthorne dryly. "The boys will have no use for me until they want a guide, but they'll leave an unloaded pack horse handy, and, as it wouldn't suit any of us to make my connection with them too plain, it will be a night or two later when I join them. In the meanwhile your part's quite easy. No trooper could ride you down unless you wanted him to, and you'll ride straight on to Montana—I've a route marked out for you. You'll stop at the places I tell you, and the testimony of anybody who saw you on the black would be quite enough to clear me if Stimson's men are too clever for the boys."

Winston sat still a moment, and it was not avarice which prompted him when he said, "Considering the risk one hundred dollars is very little."

"Of course," said Courthorne. "Still, it isn't worth any more to me, and there will be your expenses. If it doesn't suit you, I will do the thing myself and find the boys another guide."

He spoke indifferently, but Winston was not a fool, and knew that he was lying.

"Turn your face to the light," he said sharply.

A little ominous glint became visible in Courthorne's eyes, and there was just a trace of darker color in his forehead, but Winston saw it and was not astonished. Still, Courthorne did not move.

"What made you ask me that?" he said.

Winston watched him closely, but his voice betrayed no special interest as he said, "I fancied I saw a mark

across your cheek. It seemed to me that it had been made by a whip."

The deeper tint was more visible on Courthorne's forehead, where the swollen veins showed a trifle, and he appeared to swallow something before he spoke. "Aren't you asking too many questions? What has a mark on my face to do with you?"

"Nothing," said Winston quietly. "Will you go through the conditions again?"

Courthorne nodded. "I pay you one hundred dollars —now," he said. "You ride south to-morrow along the Montana trail and take the risk of the troopers overtaking you. You will remain away a fortnight at my expense, and pass in the meanwhile for me. Then you will return at night as rancher Winston, and keep the whole thing a secret from everybody."

Winston sat silent and very still again for more than a minute. He surmised that the man who made the offer had not told him all and there was more behind, but that was, after all, of no great importance. He was prepared to do a good deal for one hundred dollars, and his bare life of effort and self-denial had grown almost unendurable. He had now nothing to lose, and while some impulse urged him to the venture, he felt that it was possible fate had in store for him something better than he had known in the past. In the meanwhile the cigar he held went out, and the striking of a match as Courthorne lighted another roused him suddenly from the retrospect he was sinking into. The bitter wind still moaned about the ranch, emphasizing its loneliness, and the cedar shingles rattled dolefully overhead, while it chanced that as Winston glanced towards the roof his eyes rested on the suspended piece of rancid pork which, with a little flour and a few potatoes, had during the last

few months provided him with sustenance. It was of course a trifle, but it tipped the beam, as trifles often do, and the man who was tired of all it symbolized straightened himself with a little mirthless laugh.

"On your word of honor there is nothing beyond the risk of a few days' detention which can affect me?" he said.

"No," said Courthorne solemnly, knowing that he lied. "On my honor. The troopers could only question you. Is it a deal?"

"Yes," said Winston simply, stretching out his hand for the roll of bills the other flung down on the table, and, while one of the contracting parties knew that the other would regret it bitterly, the bargain was made.

Then Courthorne laughed in his usual indolent fashion as he said, "Well, it's all decided, and I don't even ask your word. To-morrow will see the husk sloughed off and for a fortnight you'll be Lance Courthorne. I hope you feel equal to playing the *rôle* with credit, because I wouldn't entrust my good fame to everybody."

Winston smiled dryly. "I fancy I shall," he said, and long afterwards recalled the words. "You see, I had ambitions in my callow days, and it's not my fault that hitherto I've never had a part to play."

Rancher Winston was, however, wrong in this. He had played the part of an honest man with the courage which had brought him to ruin, but there was now to be a difference.

CHAPTER III

TROOPER SHANNON'S QUARREL

THERE was bitter frost in the darkness outside when two young men stood talking in the stables of a little outpost lying a long ride back from the settlement in the lonely prairie. One leaned against a manger with a pipe in his hand, while the spotless, softly-gleaming harness hung up behind him showed what his occupation had been. The other stood bolt upright with lips set, and a faint grayness which betokened strong emotion showing through his tan. The lantern above them flickered in the icy draughts, and from out of the shadows beyond its light came the stamping of restless horses and the smell of prairie hay which is pungent with the odors of wild peppermint.

The two lads, and they were very little more, were friends, in spite of the difference in their upbringing, for there are few distinctions between caste and caste in that country where manhood is still esteemed the greatest thing, and the primitive virtues count for more than wealth or intellect. Courage and endurance still command respect in the new Northwest, and that both the lads possessed them was made evident by the fact that they were troopers of the Northwest police, a force of splendid cavalry whose duty it is to patrol the wilderness at all seasons and in all weathers, under scorching sun and in blinding snow.

The men who keep the peace of the prairie are taught what heat and thirst are, when they ride in couples

through a desolate waste wherein there is only bitter water, parched by pitiless sunrays and whitened by the intolerable dust of alkali. They also discover just how much cold the human frame can endure, when they lie down with only the stars above them, long leagues from the nearest outpost, in a trench scooped in the snow, and they know how near one may come to suffocation and yet live through the grass fires' blinding smoke. It happens now and then that two who have answered to the last roster in the icy darkness do not awaken when the lingering dawn breaks across the great white waste, and only the coyote knows their resting-place, but the watch and ward is kept, and the lonely settler dwells as safe in the wilderness as he would in an English town.

Trooper Shannon was an Irishman from the bush of Ontario; Trooper Payne, English, and a scion of a somewhat distinguished family in the old country, but while he told nobody why he left it suddenly, nobody thought of asking him. He was known to be a bold rider and careful of his beast, and that was sufficient for his comrades and the keen-eyed Sergeant Stimson. He glanced at his companion thoughtfully as he said, "She was a pretty girl. You knew her in Ontario?"

Shannon's hands trembled a little. "Sure," he said. "Larry's place was just a mile beyont our clearing, an' there was never a bonnier thing than Ailly Blake came out from the old country—but is it need there is for talking when ye've seen her? There was once I watched her smile at ye with the black eyes that would have melted the heart out of any man. Waking and sleeping they're with me still."

Three generations of the Shannons had hewn the lonely clearing further into the bush of Ontario and married the daughters of the soil, but the Celtic strain,

it was evident, had not run out yet. Payne, however, came of English stock, and expressed himself differently.

"It was a—shame," he said. "Of course he flung her over. I think you saw him, Pat?"

Shannon's face grew grayer, and he quivered visibly as his passion shook him, while Payne felt his own blood pulse faster as he remembered the graceful dark-eyed girl who had given him and his comrade many a welcome meal when their duty took them near her brother's homestead. That was, however, before one black day for Ailly and Larry Blake when Lance Courthorne also rode that way.

"Yes," said the lad from Ontario, "I was driving in for the stores when I met him in the willow bluff, an' Courthorne pulls his divil of a black horse up with a little ugly smile on the lips of him when I swung the wagon right across the trail.

"'That's not civil, trooper,' says he.

"'I'm wanting a word,' says I, with the black hate choking me at the sight of him. 'What have ye done with Ailly?'

"'Is it anything to you?' says he.

"'It's everything,' says I. 'And if ye will not tell me I'll tear it out of ye.'

"Courthorne laughs a little, but I saw the divil in his eyes. 'I don't think you're quite man enough,' says he, sitting very quiet on the big black horse. 'Any way, I can't tell you where she is just now because she left the dancing saloon she was in down in Montana when I last saw her.'

"I had the big whip that day, and I forgot everything as I heard the hiss of it round my shoulder. It came home across the ugly face of him, and then I flung it down and grabbed the carbine as he swung the black

round with one hand fumbling in his jacket. It came out empty, an' we sat there a moment, the two of us, Courthorne white as death, his eyes like burning coals, and the fingers of me trembling on the carbine. Sorrow on the man that he hadn't a pistol or I'd have sent the black soul of him to the divil it came from."

The lad panted, and Payne, who had guessed at his hopeless devotion to the girl who had listened to Courthorne, made a gesture of disapproval that was tempered by sympathy. It was for her sake, he fancied, Shannon had left the Ontario clearing and followed Larry Blake to the West.

"I'm glad he hadn't, Pat," said Payne. "What was the end of it?"

"I remembered," said the other with a groan, "remembered I was Trooper Shannon, an' dropped the carbine into the wagon. Courthorne wheels the black horse round, an' I saw the red line across the face of him.

"'You'll be sorry for this, my lad,' says he."

"He's a dangerous man," Payne said, thoughtfully. "Pat, you came near being a — ass that day. Any way, it's time we went in, and as Larry's here I shouldn't wonder if we saw Courthorne again before the morning."

The icy cold went through them to the bone as they left the stables, and it was a relief to enter the loghouse which was heated to fustiness by the glowing stove. A lamp hung from a rough birch beam, and its uncertain radiance showed motionless figures wrapped in blankets in the bunks round the walls. Two men were, however, dressing, and one already in uniform sat at a table talking to another swathed in furs, who was from his appearance a prairie farmer. The man at the

table was lean and weather-bronzed, with grizzled hair and observant eyes. They were fixed steadily upon the farmer, who knew that very little which happened upon the prairie escaped the vigilance of Sergeant Stimson.

"It's straight talk you're giving me, Larry? What do you figure on making by it?" he said.

The farmer laughed mirthlessly, "Not much, any way, beyond the chance of getting a bullet in me back or me best steer lifted one dark night. 'Tis not forgiving the rustlers are, and Courthorne's the divil," he said. "But listen now, Sergeant, I've told ye where he is, and if ye're not fit to corral him I'll ride him down meself."

Sergeant Stimson wrinkled his forehead. "If anybody knows what they're after, it should be you," he said, watching the man out of the corner of his eyes. "Still, I'm a little worried as to why, when you'll get nothing for it, you're anxious to serve the State."

The farmer clenched a big hand. "Sergeant, you that knows everything, will ye drive me mad—an' to —— with the State!" he said. "Sure, it's gospel I'm telling ye, an', as you're knowing well, it's me could tell where the boys who ride at midnight drop many a keg. Well, if ye will have your reason, it was Courthorne who put the black shame on me an' mine."

Sergeant Stimson nodded, for he had already suspected this.

"Then," he said dryly, "we'll give you a chance of helping us to put the handcuffs on him. Now, because they wouldn't risk the bridge, and the ice is not thick yet everywhere, there are just two ways they could bring the stuff across, and I figure we'd be near the thing if we fixed on Graham's Pool. Still, Courthorne's no kind of fool, and just because that crossing seems the

likeliest he might try the other one. You're ready for duty, Trooper Payne?"

The lad stood straight. "I can turn out in ten minutes, sir," he said.

"Then," and Sergeant Stimson raised his voice a trifle, "you will ride at once to the rise a league outside the settlement, and watch the Montana trail. Courthorne will probably be coming over from Winston's soon after you get there, riding the big black, and you'll keep out of sight and follow him. If he heads for Carson's Crossing, ride for Graham's at a gallop, where you'll find me with the rest. If he makes for the bridge, you will overtake him if you can and find out what he's after. It's quite likely he'll tell you nothing, and you will not arrest him, but bearing in mind that every minute he spends there will be a loss to the rustlers you'll keep him as long as you can. Trooper Shannon, you'll ride at once to the bluff above Graham's Pool and watch the trail. Stop any man who rides that way, and if it's Courthorne keep him until the rest of the boys come up with me. You've got your duty quite straight, both of you?"

The lads saluted, and went out, while the sergeant smiled a little as he glanced at the farmer and the men who were dressing.

"It's steep chances we'll have Mr. Courthorne's company to-morrow, boys," he said. "Fill up the kettle, Tom, and serve out a pint of coffee. There are reasons why we shouldn't turn out too soon. We'll saddle in an hour or so."

Two of the men went out, and the stinging blast that swept in through the open door smote a smoky smear across the blinking lamp and roused a sharper crackling from the stove. Then one returned with the kettle

and there was silence, when the fusty heat resumed its sway. Now and then a tired trooper murmured in his sleep, or there was a snapping in the stove, while the icy wind moaned about the building and the kettle commenced a soft sibilation, but nobody moved or spoke. Three shadowy figures in uniform sat just outside the light, soaking in the grateful warmth while they could, for they knew that they might spend the next night unsheltered from the arctic cold of the wilderness. The Sergeant sat with thoughtful eyes and wrinkled forehead, where the flickering radiance forced up his lean face and silhouetted his spare outline on the rough boarding behind him, and close by the farmer sucked silently at his pipe, waiting with a stony calm that sprang from fierce impatience the reckoning with the man who had brought black shame upon him.

It was about this time when Winston stood shivering a little with the bridle of a big black horse in his hand just outside the door of his homestead. A valise and two thick blankets were strapped to the saddle, and he had donned the fur cap and coat Courthorne usually wore. Courthorne himself stood close by smiling at him sardonically.

"If you keep the cap down and ride with your stirrups long, as I've fixed them, anybody would take you for me," said he. "Go straight through the settlement, and let any man you come across see you. His testimony would come in useful if Stimson tries to fix a charge on me. You know your part of the bargain. You're to be Lance Courthorne for a fortnight from to-day."

"Yes," said Winston dryly. "I wish I was equally sure of yours."

Courthorne laughed. "I'm to be rancher Winston

until to-morrow night, any way. Don't worry about me. I'll borrow those books of yours and improve my mind. Possible starvation is the only thing that threatens me, and it's unfortunate you've left nothing fit to eat behind you."

Winston swung himself into the saddle, a trifle awkwardly, for Courthorne rode with longer stirrup leathers than he was accustomed to, then he raised one hand, and the other man laughed a little as he watched him sink into the darkness of the shadowy prairie. When the drumming of hoofs was lost in the moaning of the wind he strode towards the stable, and taking up the lantern surveyed Winston's horse thoughtfully.

"The thing cuts with both edges, and the farmer only sees one of them," he said. "That beast's about as difficult to mistake as my black is."

Then he returned to the loghouse, and presently put on Winston's old fur coat and tattered fur cap. Had Winston seen his unpleasant smile as he did it, he would probably have wheeled the black horse and returned at a gallop, but the farmer was sweeping across the waste of whitened grass at least a league away by this time. Now and then a half-moon blinked down between wisps of smoky cloud, but for the most part gray dimness hung over the prairie, and the drumming of hoofs rang stridently through the silence. Winston knew a good horse, and had bred several of them—before a blizzard which swept the prairie killed off his finest yearlings as well as their pedigree sire—and his spirits rose as the splendid beast swung into faster stride beneath him.

For two weeks at least he would be free from anxiety, and the monotony of his life at the lonely homestead had grown horribly irksome. Winston was young, and now, when for a brief space he had left his cares

behind, the old love of adventure which had driven him out from England once more awakened and set his blood stirring. For the first time in six years of struggle he did not know what lay before him, and he had a curious, half-instinctive feeling that the trail he was traveling would lead him farther than Montana. It was borne in upon him that he had left the old hopeless life behind, and stirred by some impulse he broke into a little song he had sung in England and long forgotten. He had a clear voice, and the words, which were filled with the hope of youth, rang bravely through the stillness of the frozen wilderness until the horse blundered, and Winston stopped with a little smile.

"It's four long years since I felt as I do to-night," he said.

Then he drew bridle and checked the horse as the lights of the settlement commenced to blink ahead, for the trail was rutted deep and frozen into the likeness of adamant, but when the first frame houses flung tracks of yellow radiance across the whitened grass he dropped his left arm a trifle, and rode in at a canter as he had seen Courthorne do. Winston did not like Courthorne, but he meant to keep his bargain.

As he passed the hotel more slowly a man who came out called to him. "Hello, Lance! Taking the trail?" he said. "Well, it kind of strikes me it's time you did. One of Stimson's boys was down here, and he seemed quite anxious about you."

Winston knew the man, and was about to urge the horse forward, but in place of it drew bridle, and laughed with a feeling that was wholly new to him as he remembered that his neighbors now and then bantered him about his English, and that Courthorne only used the Western colloquialism when it suited him.

"Sergeant Stimson is an enterprising officer, but there are as keen men as he is," he said. "You will, in case he questions you, remember when you met me,"

"Oh, yes," said the other. "Still, I wouldn't fool too much with him—and where did you get those mittens from? That's the kind of outfit that would suit Winston."

Winston nodded, for though he had turned his face from the light the hand he held the bridle with was visible, and his big fur gloves were very old.

"They are his. The fact is, I've just come from his place," he said. "Well, you can tell Stimson you saw me starting out on the Montana trail."

He shook the bridle, laughed softly as the frame houses flitted by, and then grew intent when the darkness of the prairie once more closed down. It was, he knew, probable that some of Stimson's men would be looking out for him, and he had not sufficient faith in Courthorne's assurances to court an encounter with them.

The lights had faded, and the harsh grass was crackling under the drumming hoofs when the blurred outline of a mounted man showed up on the crest of a rise, and a shout came down.

"Hello! Pull up there a moment, stranger."

There was nothing alarming in the greeting, but Winston recognized the ring of command, as well as the faint jingle of steel which had preceded it, and pressed his heels home. The black swung forward faster, and Winston glancing over his shoulder saw the dusky shape was now moving down the incline. Then the voice rose again more commandingly.

"Pull up, I want a talk with you."

Winston turned his head a moment, and remembering

Courthorne's English flung back the answer, "Sorry I haven't time."

The faint musical jingle grew plainer, there was a thud of hoofs behind, and the curious exhilaration returned to Winston as the big black horse stretched out at a gallop. The soil was hard as granite, but the matted grasses formed a covering that rendered fast riding possible to a man who took the risks, and Winston knew there were few horses in the Government service to match the one he rode. Still, it was evident that the trooper meant to overtake him, and recollecting his compact he tightened his grip on the bridle. It was a long way to the ranch where he was to spend the night, and he knew that the further he drew the trooper on, the better it would suit Courthorne.

So they swept on through the darkness over the empty waste, the trooper who was riding hard slowly creeping up behind. Still, Winston held the horse in until a glance over his shoulder showed him that there was less than a hundred yards between them, and he fancied he heard a portentous rattle as well as the thud of hoofs. It was not unlike that made by a carbine flung across the saddle. This suggested unpleasant possibilities, and he slackened his grip on the bridle. Then a breathless shout rang out, "Pull up or I'll fire."

Winston wondered if the threat was genuine or what is termed "bluff" in that country, but, as he had decided objections to being shot in the back to please Courthorne, sent his heels home. The horse shot forward beneath him, and, though no carbine flashed, the next backward glance showed him that the distance between him and the pursuer was drawing out, while when he stared ahead again the dark shape of willows or birches cut the sky-line. As they came back to him

the drumming of hoofs swelled into a staccato roar, while presently the trail grew steep, and dark boughs swayed above him. In another few minutes something smooth and level flung back a blink of light, and the timbers of a wooden bridge rattled under his passage. Then he was racing upwards through the gloom of wind-dwarfed birches on the opposite side listening for the rattle behind him on the bridge, and after a struggle with the horse pulled him up smoking when he did not hear it.

There was a beat of hoofs across the river, but it was slower than when he had last heard it and grew momentarily less audible, and Winston laughed as he watched the steam of the horse and his own breath rise in a thin white cloud.

"The trooper has given it up, and now for Montana," he said.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE BLUFF

IT was very dark amid the birches where Trooper Shannon sat motionless in his saddle gazing down into the denser blackness of the river hollow. The stream ran deep below the level of the prairie, as the rivers of that country usually do, and the trees which there alone found shelter from the winds straggled, gnarled and stunted, up either side of the steep declivity. Close behind the trooper a sinuous trail seamed by ruts and the print of hoofs stretched away across the empty prairie. It forked on the outskirts of the bluff, and one arm dipped steeply to the river where, because the stream ran slow just there and the bottom was firm, a horseman might cross when the water was low, and heavy sledges make the passage on the ice in winter time. The other arm twisted in and out among the birches towards the bridge, but that detour increased the distance to any one traveling north or south by two leagues or so.

The ice, however, was not very thick as yet, and Shannon, who had heard it ring hollowly under him, surmised that while it might be possible to lead a laden horse across, there would be some risk attached to the operation. For that very reason, and although his opinion had not been asked, he agreed with Sergeant Stimson that the whisky-runners would attempt the passage. They were men who took the risks as they came, and that route would considerably shorten the journey it

was especially desirable for them to make at night, while it would, Shannon fancied, appear probable to them that if the police had word of their intentions they would watch the bridge. Between it and the frozen ford the stream ran faster, and the trooper decided that no mounted man could cross the thinner ice.

It was very cold as well as dark, for although the snow which usually precedes the frost in that country had not come as yet, it was evidently not far away, and the trooper shivered in the blasts from the pole which cut through fur and leather with the keenness of steel. The temperature had fallen steadily since morning, and now there was a presage of a blizzard in the moaning wind and murky sky. If it broke and scattered its blinding whiteness upon the roaring blast there would be but little hope for any man or beast caught shelterless in the empty wilderness, for it is beyond the power of anything made of flesh and blood to withstand that cold.

Already a fine haze of snow swirled between the birch twigs every now and then, and stung the few patches of the trooper's unprotected skin as though they had been pricked with red-hot needles. It, however, seldom lasted more than a minute, and when it whirled away, a half-moon shone down for a moment between smoky clouds. The uncertain radiance showed the thrashing birches rising from the hollow, row on row, struck a faint sparkle from the ice beneath them, and then went out leaving the gloom intensified. It was evident to Shannon that his eyes would not be much use to him that night, for which reason he kept his ears uncovered at the risk of losing them, but though he had been born in the bush and all the sounds of the wilderness had for him a meaning, hearing did not

promise to be of much assistance. The dim trees roared about him with a great thrashing of twigs, and when the wilder gusts had passed there was an eery moaning through which came the murmur of leagues of tormented grasses. The wind was rising rapidly, and it would, he fancied, drown the beat of approaching hoofs as well as any cry from his comrades.

Four of them were hidden amidst the birches where the trail wound steeply upwards through the bluff across the river, two on the nearer side not far below, and Trooper Shannon's watch would serve two purposes. He was to let the rustlers pass him if they rode for the ford, and then help to cut off the retreat of any who escaped the sergeant, while if they found the ice too thin for loaded beasts or rode towards the bridge, a flash from his carbine would bring his comrades across in time to join the others who were watching that trail. It had, as usual with Stimson's schemes, all been carefully thought out, and the plan was eminently workable, but unfortunately for the grizzled sergeant a better brain than his had foreseen the combination.

In the meanwhile the lad felt his limbs grow stiff and almost useless, and a lethargic numbness blunt the keenness of his faculties as the heat went out of him. He had more than usual endurance, and utter cold, thirst, and the hunger that most ably helps the frost, are not infrequently the portion of the wardens of the prairie, but there is a limit to what man can bear, and the troopers who watched by the frozen river that night had almost reached it. Shannon could not feel the stirrups with his feet. One of his ears was tingling horribly as the blood that had almost left it resumed its efforts to penetrate the congealing flesh, while the mittened hands he beat upon his breast fell solidly on

his wrappings without separate motion of the fingers. Once or twice the horse stamped fretfully, but a touch of hand and heel quieted him, for though the frozen flesh may shrink, unwavering obedience is demanded equally from man and beast enrolled in the service of the Northwest police.

"Stiddy, now," said the lad, partly to discover if he still retained the power of speech. "Sure ye know the order that was given me, and if it's a funeral that comes of it the Government will bury ye."

He sighed as he beat his hands upon his breast again, and when a flicker of moonlight smote a passing track of brightness athwart the tossing birches his young face was very grim. Like many another trooper of the Northwest police, Shannon had his story, and he remembered the one trace of romance that had brightened his hard bare life that night as he waited for the man who had dissipated it.

When Larry Blake moved West from Ontario, Shannon, drawn by his sister's dark eyes, followed him, and took up a Government grant of prairie sod. His dollars were few, but he had a stout heart and two working oxen, and nothing seemed impossible while Ailly Blake smiled on him, and she smiled tolerably frequently, for Shannon was a well-favored lad. He had worked harder than most grown men could do, won one good harvest, and had a few dollars in the bank when Courthorne rode up to Blake's homestead on his big black horse. After that, all Shannon's hopes and ambitions came down with a crash; and the day he found Blake gray in face with shame and rage, he offered Sergeant Stimson his services. Now he was filled with an unholy content that he had done so, for he came of a race that does not forget an injury and has sufficient cause for a jealous

pride in the virtue of its women. He and Larry might have forgiven a pistol shot, but they could not forget the shame.

Suddenly he stiffened to attention, for though a man of the cities would probably have heard nothing but the wailing of the wind, he caught a faint rhythmic drumming which might have been made by a galloping horse. It ceased, and he surmised, probably correctly, that it was trooper Payne returning. It was, however, his business to watch the forking of the trail, and when he could only hear the thrashing of the birches, he moved his mittened hand from the bridle, and patted the restive horse. Just then the bluff was filled with sound as a blast that drove a haze of snow before it roared down. It was followed by a sudden stillness that was almost bewildering, and when a blink of moonlight came streaming down, Trooper Shannon grabbed at his carbine, for a man stood close beside him in the trail. The lad, who had neither seen nor heard him come, looked down on the glinting barrel of a Marlin rifle and saw a set white face behind it.

"Hands up!" said a hoarse voice. "Throw that thing down."

Trooper Shannon recognized it, and all the fierce hate he was capable of flamed up. It shook him with a gust of passion, and it was not fear that caused his stiffened fingers to slip upon the carbine. It fell with a rattle, and while he sat still, almost breathless and livid in face, the man laughed a little.

"That's better, get down," he said.

Trooper Shannon flung himself from the saddle, and alighted heavily as a flung-off sack would have done, for his limbs refused to bend. Still it was not from lack of courage that he obeyed, and during one moment

he had clutched the bridle with the purpose of riding over his enemy. He had, however, been taught to think for himself swiftly and shrewdly from his boyhood up, and realized instinctively that if he escaped scathless the ringing of the rifle would warn the rustlers who he surmised were close behind. He was also a police trooper broken to the iron bond of discipline, and if a bullet from the Marlin was to end his career, he determined it should if possible also terminate his enemy's liberty. The gust of rage had gone and left him with the cold vindictive cunning the Celt who has a grievous injury to remember is also capable of, and there was contempt but no fear in his voice as he turned to Courthorne quietly.

"Sure it's your turn now," he said. "The last time I put my mark on the divil's face of ye."

Courthorne laughed wickedly. "It was a bad day's work for you. I haven't forgotten yet," he said. "I'm only sorry you're not a trifle older, but it will teach Sergeant Stimson the folly of sending a lad to deal with me. Well, walk straight into the bush, and remember that the muzzle of the rifle is scarcely three feet behind you!"

Trooper Shannon did so with black rage in his heart, and his empty hands at his sides. He was a police trooper, and a bushman born, and knew that the rustlers' laden horses would find some difficulty in remounting the steep trail and could not escape to left or right, once they were entangled amidst the trees. Then it would be time to give the alarm, and go down with a bullet in his body, or by some contrivance evade the deadly rifle and come to grips with his enemy. He also knew Lance Courthorne, and remembering how the lash had seamed his face, expected no pity. One of them it

was tolerably certain would have set out on the long trail before the morning, but they breed grim men in the bush of Ontario, and no other kind ride very long with the wardens of the prairie.

"Stop where you are," said Courthorne, presently. "Now then, turn round. Move a finger or open your lips, and I'll have great pleasure in shooting you. In the meanwhile you can endeavor to make favor with whatever saint is honored by the charge of you."

Shannon smiled in a fashion that resembled a snarl as once more a blink of moonlight shone down upon them, and in place of showing apprehension, his young white face, from which the bronze had faded, was venomous.

"And my folks were Orange, but what does that matter now?" said he. "There'll be one of us in—to-morrow, but for the shame ye put on Larry ye'll carry my mark there with ye."

Courthorne looked at him with a little glow in his eyes. "You haven't felt mine yet," he said. "You will probably talk differently when you do."

It may have been youthful bravado, but Trooper Shannon laughed. "In the meanwhile," he said, "I'm wondering why you're wearing an honest man's coat and cap. Faith, if he saw them on ye, Winston would burn them."

Courthorne returned no answer, and the moonlight went out, but they stood scarcely three feet apart, and one of them knew that any move he made would be followed by the pressure of the other's finger on the trigger. He, however, did not move at all, and while the birches roared about them they stood silently face to face, the man of birth and pedigree with a past behind him and blood already upon his head, and the raw lad

from the bush, his equal before the tribunal that would presently judge their quarrel.

In the meanwhile Trooper Shannon heard a drumming of hoofs that grew steadily louder before Courthorne apparently noticed the sound, and his trained ears told him that the rustlers' horses were coming down the trail. Now they had passed the forking, and when the branches ceased roaring again he knew they had floundered down the first of the declivity, and it would be well to wait a little until they had straggled out where the trail was narrow and deeply rutted. No one could turn them hastily there, and the men who drove them could scarcely escape the troopers who waited them, if they blundered on through the darkness of the bush. So five breathless minutes passed, Trooper Shannon standing tense and straight with every nerve tingling as he braced himself for an effort, Courthorne stooping a little with forefinger on the trigger, and the Marlin rifle at his hip. Then through a lull there rose a clearer thud of hoofs. It was lost in the thrashing of the twigs as a gust roared down again, and Trooper Shannon launched himself like a panther upon his enemy.

He might have succeeded, and the effort was gallantly made, but Courthorne had never moved his eyes from the shadowy object before him, and even as it sprang, his finger contracted further on the trigger. There was a red flash, and because he fired from the hip the trigger guard gashed his mitten. He sprang sideways scarcely feeling the bite of the steel, for the lad's hand brushed his shoulder. Then there was a crash as something went down heavily amidst the crackling twigs. Courthorne stooped a little, panting in the smoke that blew into his eyes, jerked the Marlin lever, and, as the moon came through again, had a

blurred vision of a white drawn face that stared up at him, still with defiance in its eyes. He looked down into it as he drew the trigger once more.

Shannon quivered a moment, and then lay very still, and it was high time for Courthorne to look to himself, for there was a shouting in the bluff, and something came crashing through the undergrowth. Even then his cunning did not desert him, and flinging the Marlin down beside the trooper, he slipped almost silently in and out among the birches and swung himself into the saddle of a tethered horse. Unlooping the bridle from a branch, he pressed his heels home, realizing as he did it that there was no time to lose, for it was evident that one of the troopers was somewhat close behind him, and others were coming across the river. He knew the bluff well, and having no desire to be entangled in it was heading for the prairie, when a blink of moonlight showed him a lad in uniform riding at a gallop between him and the crest of the slope. It was Trooper Payne, and Courthorne knew him for a very bold horseman.

Now, it is possible that had one of the rustlers, who were simple men with primitive virtues as well as primitive passions, been similarly placed, he would have joined his comrades and taken his chance with them, but Courthorne kept faith with nobody unless it suited him, and was equally dangerous to his friends and enemies. Trooper Shannon had also been silenced forever, and if he could cross the frontier unrecognized, nobody would believe the story of the man he would leave to bear the brunt in place of him. Accordingly he headed at a gallop down the winding trail, while sharp orders and a drumming of hoofs grew louder behind him, and hoarse cries rose in front. Trooper Payne was, it seemed, at least keeping pace with him, and he glanced

over his shoulder as he saw something dark and shadowy across the trail. It was apparently a horse from which two men were struggling to loose its burden.

Courthorne guessed that the trail was blocked in front of it by other loaded beasts, and he could not get past in time, for the half-seen trooper was closing with him fast, and another still rode between him and the edge of the bluff, cutting off his road to the prairie. It was evident he could not go on, while the crackle of twigs, roar of hoofs, and jingle of steel behind him, made it plain that to turn was to ride back upon the carbines of men who would be quite willing to use them. There alone remained the river. It ran fast below him, and the ice was thin, and for just a moment he tightened his grip on the bridle.

"We've got you!" a hoarse voice reached him. "You're taking steep chances if you go on."

Courthorne swung off from the trail. There was a flash above him, something whirred through the twigs above his head, and the horse plunged as he drove his heels in.

"One of them gone for the river," another shout rang out, and Courthorne was crashing through the undergrowth straight down the declivity, while thin snow whirled about him, and now and then he caught the faint glimmer flung back by the ice beneath.

Swaying boughs lashed him, his fur cap was whipped away, and he felt that his face was bleeding, but there was another crackle close behind him, for Trooper Payne was riding as daringly, and he carried a carbine. Had he desired it Courthorne could not turn. The bronco he bestrode was madly excited and less than half-broken, and it is probable no man could have pulled him up just then. It may also have been borne in upon

Courthorne, that he owed a little to those he had left behind him in the old country, and he had not lost his pride. There was, it seemed, no escape, but he had at least a choice of endings, and with a little breathless laugh he rode straight for the river.

It was with difficulty Trooper Payne pulled his horse up on the steep bank a minute later. A white haze was now sliding down the hollow between the two dark walls of trees, and something seemed to move in the midst of it while the ice rang about it. Then as the trooper pitched up his carbine there was a crash that was followed by a horrible floundering and silence again. Payne sat still shivering a little in his saddle until the snow that whirled about him blotted out all the birches, and a roaring blast came down.

He knew there was now nothing that he could do. The current had evidently sucked the fugitive under, and, dismounting, he groped his way up the slope, leading the horse by the bridle, and only swung himself into the saddle when he found the trail again. A carbine flashed in front of him, two dim figures went by at a gallop, and a third one flung an order over his shoulder as he passed.

"Go back. The Sergeant's hurt and Shannon has got a bullet in him."

Trooper Payne had surmised as much already, and went back as fast as he could ride, while the beat of hoofs grew fainter down the trail. Ten minutes later, he drew bridle close by a man who held a lantern, and saw Sergeant Stimson sitting very grim in face on the ground. It transpired later that his horse had fallen and thrown him, and it was several weeks before he rode again.

"You lost your man?" he said. "Get down."

Payne dismounted. "Yes, sir, I fancy he is dead," he said. "He tried the river, and the ice wouldn't carry him. I saw him ride away from here just after the first shot, and fancied he fired at Shannon. Have you seen him, sir?"

The other trooper moved his lantern, and Payne gasped as he saw a third man stooping, with the white face of his comrade close by his feet. Shannon appeared to recognize him, for his eyes moved a little and the gray lips fell apart. Then Payne turned his head aside while the other trooper nodded compassionately in answer to his questioning glance.

"I've sent one of the boys to Graham's for a wagon," said the Sergeant. "You saw the man who fired at him?"

"Yes, sir," said Trooper Payne.

"You knew him?" and there was a ring in the Sergeant's voice.

"Yes, sir," said the trooper. "At least he was riding Winston's horse, and had on the old long coat of his."

Sergeant Stimson nodded, and pointed to the weapon lying with blackened muzzle at his feet. "And I think you could recognize that rifle? There's F. Winston cut on the stock of it."

Payne said nothing, for the trooper signed to him. "I fancy Shannon wants to talk to you," he said.

The lad knelt down, slipped one arm about his comrade's neck, and took the mittened hand in his own. Shannon smiled up at him feebly.

"Winston's horse, and his cap," he said, and then stopped, gasping horribly.

"You will remember that, boys," said the Sergeant.

Payne could say nothing. Trooper Shannon and he

had ridden through icy blizzard and scorching heat together, and he felt his manhood melting as he looked down into his dimming eyes. There was a curious look in them which suggested a strenuous endeavor and an appeal, and the lips moved again.

"It was," said Shannon, and moved his head a little on Payne's arm, apparently in an agony of effort.

Then the birches roared about them, and drowned the feeble utterance, while when the gust passed all three, who had not heard what preceded it, caught only one word, "Winston."

Trooper Shannon's eyes closed, and his head fell back, while the snow beat softly into his upturned face, and there was a very impressive silence intensified by the moaning of the wind, until the rattle of wheels came faintly down the trail.

CHAPTER V

MISS BARRINGTON COMES HOME

THE long train was slackening speed and two whistles rang shrilly through the roar of wheels when Miss Barrington laid down the book with which she had beguiled her journey of fifteen hundred miles, and rose from her seat in a corner of the big first-class car. The car was sumptuously upholstered and its decorations tasteful as well as lavish, but just then it held no other passenger, and Miss Barrington smiled curiously as she stood, swaying a little, in front of the mirror at one end of it, wrapping her furs about her. There was, however, a faint suggestion of regret in the smile, and the girl's eyes grew grave again, for the soft cushions, dainty curtains, gleaming gold and nickel, and equable temperature formed a part of the sheltered life she was about to leave behind her, and there would, she knew, be a difference in the future. Still, she laughed again, as, drawing the little fur cap well down upon her broad white forehead, she nodded at her own reflection.

"One cannot have everything, and you might have stayed there and reveled in civilization if you had liked," she said.

Crossing to the door of the portico she stood a moment with fingers on its handle, and once more looked about her. The car was very cosy, and Maud Barrington had all the average young woman's appreciation of the smoother side of life, although she had also the capacity, which is by no means so common, for extracting

the most it had to give from the opposite one. Still, it was with a faint regret she prepared to complete what had been a deed of renunciation. Montreal, with its gayeties and luxuries, had not seemed so very far away while she was carried west amid all the comforts artisans who were also artists could provide for the traveler, but once that door closed behind her she would be cut adrift from it all, and left face to face with the simple, strenuous life of the prairie.

Maud Barrington had, however, made her mind up some weeks ago, and when the lock closed with a little crack that seemed to emphasize the fact that the door was shut, she had shaken the memories from her, and was quietly prepared to look forward instead of back. It also needed some little courage, for, as she stood with the furs fluttering about her on the lurching platform, the cold went through her like a knife, and the roofs of a little prairie town rose up above the willows the train was now crawling through. The odors that greeted her nostrils were the reverse of pleasant, and glancing down with the faintest shiver of disgust, her eyes rested on the litter of empty cans, discarded garments, and other even more unsightly things which are usually dumped in the handiest bluff by the citizens of a springing Western town. They have, for the most part, but little appreciation of the picturesque, and it would take a good deal to affect their health.

Then the dwarfed trees opened out, and flanked by two huge wheat elevators and a great water tank, the prairie city stood revealed. It was crude and repellant, devoid of anything that could please the most lenient eye, for the bare frame houses rose, with their rough boarding weathered and cracked by frost and sun, hideous almost in their simplicity, from the white prairie. Paint

was apparently an unknown luxury, and pavement there was none, though a rude plank platform straggled some distance above the ground down either side of the street, so that the citizens might not sink knee-deep in the mire of the spring thawing. Here and there a dilapidated wagon was drawn up in front of a store. With a clanging of the big bell the locomotive rolled into the little station, and Maud Barrington looked down upon a group of silent men who had sauntered there to enjoy the one relaxation the desolate place afforded them.

There was very little in their appearance to attract the attention of a young woman of Miss Barrington's upbringing. They had grave bronzed faces, and wore, for the most part, old fur coats stained here and there with soil, and their mittens and moccasins were not in good repair; but there was a curious steadiness in their gaze which vaguely suggested the slow stubborn courage that upheld them through the strenuous effort and grim self-denial of their toilsome lives. They were small wheat-growers who had driven in to purchase provisions or inquire the price of grain, and here and there a mittened hand was raised to a well-worn cap, for most of them recognized Miss Barrington of Silverdale Grange. She returned their greetings graciously, and then swung herself from the platform, with a smile in her eyes, as a man came hastily and yet as it were with a certain deliberation in her direction.

He was elderly, but held himself erect, while his furs, which were good, fitted him in a fashion which suggested a uniform. He also wore boots which reached half-way to the knee, and were presumably lined to resist the prairie cold, which few men at that season would do, and scarcely a speck of dust marred their lustrous exterior, while as much of his face as was visible beneath

the great fur cap was lean and commanding. Its salient features were the keen and somewhat imperious gray eyes and long straight nose, while something in the squareness of the man's shoulders and his pose set him apart from the prairie farmers, and suggested the cavalry officer. He was in fact Colonel Barrington, founder and autocratic ruler of the English community of Silverdale, and he had been awaiting his niece somewhat impatiently. Colonel Barrington was invariably punctual, and resented the fact that the train had come in an hour later than it should have done.

"So you have come back to us. We have been longing for you, my dear," he said. "I don't know what we should have done had they kept you in Montreal altogether."

Maud Barrington smiled, though there was a brightness in her eyes and a faint warmth in her cheek, for the sincerity of her uncle's welcome was evident.

"Yes," she said, "I have come back. It was very pleasant in the city, and they were all kind to me, but I think, henceforward, I would sooner stay with you on the prairie."

Colonel Barrington patted the hand he drew through his arm, and there was a very kindly smile in his eyes as they left the station and crossed the track towards a little, and by no means very comfortable, wooden hotel. He stopped outside it.

"I want to see the horses put in and get our mail," he said. "Mrs. Jasper expects you and will have tea ready."

He disappeared behind the wooden building, and his niece standing a moment on the veranda watched the long train roll away down the faint blur of track that ran west to the farthest verge of the great white wilder-

ness. Then with a little impatient gesture she went into the hotel.

"That is another leaf turned down, and there is no use looking back, but I wonder what is written on the rest," she said.

Twenty minutes later she watched Colonel Barrington cross the street with a bundle of letters in his hand. She fancied that his step was slower than it had been, and that he seemed a trifle preoccupied and embarrassed, but he spoke with quiet kindliness when he handed her into the waiting sleigh, and the girl's spirits rose as they swung smoothly northwards behind two fast horses across the prairie. It stretched away before her, ridged here and there with a dusky birch bluff or willow grove under a vault of crystalline blue. The sun that had no heat in it struck a silvery glitter from the snow, and the trail swept back to the horizon a sinuous blue-gray smear, while the keen, dry cold and sense of swift motion set the girl's blood stirring. After all, it seemed to her, there were worse lives than those the Western farmers led on the great levels under the frost and sun.

Colonel Barrington watched her with a little gleam of approval in his eyes. "You are not sorry to come back to this and Silverdale?" he said, sweeping his mittened hand vaguely round the horizon.

"No," said the girl, with a little laugh. "At least, I shall not be sorry to return to Silverdale. It has a charm of its own, for while one is occasionally glad to get away from it, one is even more pleased to come home again. It is a somewhat purposeless life our friends are leading yonder in the cities. I, of course, mean the women."

Barrington nodded. "And some of the men! Well, we have room here for the many who are going to the

devil in the old country for the lack of something worth while to do, though I am afraid there is considerably less prospect than I once fancied there would be of their making money."

His niece noticed the gravity in his face, and sat thoughtfully silent for several minutes while with the snow hissing beneath it the sleigh dipped into and swung out of a hollow.

Colonel Barrington had founded the Silverdale settlement ten years earlier and gathered about him other men with a grievance who had once served their nation, and the younger sons of English gentlemen who had no inclination for commerce, and found that lack of brains and capital debarred them from either a political or military career. He had settled them on the land, and taught them to farm, while, for the community had prospered at first when Western wheat was dear, it had taken ten years to bring home to him the fact that men who dined ceremoniously each evening and spent at least a third of their time in games and sport, could not well compete with the grim bushmen from Ontario, or the lean Dakota plowmen who ate their meals in ten minutes and toiled at least twelve hours every day.

Colonel Barrington was slow to believe that the race he sprang from could be equaled and much less beaten at anything, while his respect for and scrupulous observance of insular traditions had cost him a good deal, and left him a poorer man than he had been when he founded Silverdale. Maud Barrington had been his ward, and he still directed the farming of a good many acres of wheat land which she now held in her own right. The soil was excellent, and would in all probability have provided one of the Ontario men with a

very desirable revenue, but Colonel Barrington had no taste for small economies.

"I want to hear all the news," said the girl. "You can begin at the beginning—the price of wheat. I fancied, when I saw you, it had been declining."

Barrington sighed a little. "Hard wheat is five cents down, and I am sorry I persuaded you to hold your crop. I am very much afraid we shall see the balance the wrong side again next half-year."

Maud Barrington smiled curiously. There was no great cause for merriment in the information given her, but it emphasized the contrast between the present and the careless life she had lately led when her one thought had been how to extract the greatest pleasure from the day. One had frequently to grapple with the problems arising from scanty finances at Silverdale.

"It will go up again," she said. "Is there anything else?"

Barrington's face grew a trifle grim as he nodded. "There is, and while I have not much expectation of an advance in prices, I have been worrying over another affair lately."

His niece regarded him steadily. "You mean Lance Courthorne?"

"Yes," said Barrington, who flicked the near horse somewhat viciously with the whip. "He is also sufficient to cause any man with my responsibilities considerable anxiety."

Maud Barrington looked thoughtful. "You fancy he will come to Silverdale?"

Barrington appeared to be repressing an inclination towards vigorous speech with some difficulty, and a little glint crept into his eyes. "If I could by any means prevent it, the answer would be, No. As it is, you

know that, while I founded it, Silverdale was one of Geoffrey Courthorne's imperialistic schemes, and a good deal of the land was recorded in his name. That being so, he had every right to leave the best farm on it to the man he had disinherited, especially as Lance will not get a penny of the English property. Still, I do not know why he did so, because he never spoke of him without bitterness."

"Yes," said the girl, while a little flush crept into her face. "I was sorry for the old man. It was a painful story."

Colonel Barrington nodded. "It is one that is best forgotten—and you do not know it all. Still, the fact that the man may settle among us is not the worst. As you know, there was every reason to believe that Geoffrey intended all his property at Silverdale for you."

"I have much less right to it than his son, and the colonial cure is not infrequently efficacious," said Miss Barrington. "Lance may, after all, quiet down, and he must have some good qualities."

The Colonel's smile was very grim. "It is fifteen years since I saw him at Westham, and they were not much in evidence then. I can remember two little episodes, in which he figured, with painful distinctness, and one was the hanging of a terrier which had in some way displeased him. The beast was past assistance when I arrived on the scene, but the devilish pleasure in the lad's face sent a chill through me. In the other, the gardener's lad flung a stone at a blackbird on the wall above the vinery, and Master Lance, who I fancy did not like the gardener's lad, flung one through the glass. Geoffrey, who was angry, but had not seen what I saw, haled the boy before him, and Lance looked him in the face and lied with the assurance of an ambassador. The

end was that the gardener who was admonished cuffed the innocent lad. These, my dear, are somewhat instructive memories."

"I wonder," said Maud Barrington, glancing out across the prairie which was growing dusky now, "why you took the trouble to call them up for me?"

The Colonel smiled dryly. "I never saw a Courthorne who could not catch a woman's eye, or had any undue diffidence about making the most of the fact, and that is partly why they have brought so much trouble on everybody connected with them. Further, it is unfortunate that women are not infrequently more inclined to be gracious to the sinner who repents, when it is worth his while, than they are to the honest man who has done no wrong. Nor do I know that it is only pity which influences them. Some of you take an exasperating delight in picturesque rascality."

Miss Barrington laughed, and fearlessly met her uncle's glance. "Then you don't believe in penitence?"

"Well," said the Colonel dryly, "I am, I hope, a Christian man, but it would be difficult to convince me that the gambler, cattle-thief, and whisky-runner who ruined every man and woman who trusted him will be admitted to the same place as clean-lived English gentlemen. There are, my dear, plenty of them still."

Barrington spoke almost fiercely, and then flushed through his tan, when the girl looking into his eyes smiled a little. "Yes," she said, "I can believe it, because I owe a good deal to one of them."

The ring in the girl's voice belied the smile, and the speech was warranted, for, dogmatic, domineering, and vindictive as he was apt to be occasionally, the words he had used applied most fitly to Colonel Barrington. His word at least had never been broken, and had he not

adhered steadfastly to his own rigid code, he would have been a good deal richer man than he was then. Nor did his little shortcomings which were burlesqued virtues, and ludicrous now and then, greatly detract from the stamp of dignity which, for speech was his worst point, sat well upon him. He was innately conservative to the backbone, though since an ungrateful Government had slighted him, he had become an ardent Canadian, and in all political questions aggressively democratic.

"My dear, I sometimes fancy I am a hypercritical old fogy!" he said, and sighed a little, while once more the anxious look crept into his face. "Just now I wish devoutly I was a better business man."

Nothing more was said for a little, and Miss Barrington watched the crimson sunset burn out low down on the prairie's western rim. Then the pale stars blinked out through the creeping dusk, and a great silence and an utter cold settled down upon the waste. The muffled thud of hoofs, and the crunching beneath the sliding steel seemed to intensify it, and there was a suggestion of frozen brilliancy in the sparkle flung back by the snow. Then a coyote howled dolefully on a distant bluff, and the girl shivered as she shrank down further amidst the furs.

"Forty degrees of frost," said the Colonel. "Perhaps more. This is very different from the cold of Montreal. Still, you'll see the lights of Silverdale from the crest of the next rise."

It was, however, an hour before they reached them, and Miss Barrington was almost frozen when the first square loghouse rose out of the prairie. It and others that followed it flitted by, and then, flanked by a great birch bluff, with outlying barns, granaries, and stables

looming black about it against a crystalline sky, Silverdale Grange grew into shape across their way. Its rows of ruddy windows cast streaks of flickering orange down the trail, the baying of dogs changed into a joyous clamor, when the Colonel reined in his team, half-seen men in furs waved a greeting, and one who risked frostbite with his cap at his knee handed Miss Barrington from the sleigh and up the veranda stairway.

She had need of the assistance, for her limbs were stiff and almost powerless, and she gasped a little when she passed into the drowsy warmth and brightness of the great log-walled hall. The chilled blood surged back tingling to her skin, and swaying with a creeping faintness she found refuge in the arms of a gray-haired lady who stooped and kissed her gently. Then the door swung to, and she was home again in the wooden grange of Silverdale, which stood far remote from any civilization but its own on the frozen levels of the great white plain.

CHAPTER VI

ANTICIPATIONS

IT was late at night, and outside the prairie lay white and utterly silent under the arctic cold, when Maud Barrington, who glanced at it through the double windows, flung back the curtains with a little shiver, and turning towards the fire sat down on a little velvet footstool beside her aunt's knee. She had shaken out the coils of lustrous brown hair which flowed about her shoulders glinting in the light of the shaded lamp, and it was with a little gesture of physical content she stretched her hands towards the hearth. A crumbling birch log still gleamed redly amidst the feathery ashes, but its effect was chiefly artistic, for no open fire could have dissipated the cold of the prairie, and a big tiled stove, brought from Teutonic Minnesota, furnished the needful warmth.

The girl's face was partly in shadow, and her figure foreshortened by her pose, which accentuated its rounded outline and concealed its willowy slenderness; but the broad white forehead and straight nose became visible when she moved her head a trifle, and a faintly humorous sparkle crept into the clear brown eyes. Possibly Maud Barrington looked her best just then, for the lower part of the pale-tinted face was a trifle too firm in its modeling.

"No, I am not tired, aunt, and I could not sleep just now," she said. "You see, after leaving all that behind one, one feels, as it were, adrift, and it is necessary to realize one's self again."

The little silver-haired lady who sat in the big basket chair smiled down upon her, and laid a thin white hand that was still beautiful upon the gleaming hair.

"I can understand, my dear, and am glad you enjoyed your stay in the city, because sometimes when I count your birthdays I can't help a fancy that you are not young enough," she said. "You have lived out here with two old people who belong to the past too much."

The girl moved a little, and swept her glance slowly round the room. It was small and scantily furnished, though great curtains shrouded door and window, and here and there a picture relieved the bareness of the walls, which were paneled with roughly-dressed British-Columbian cedar. The floor was of redwood diligently polished, and adorned, not covered, by one or two skins brought by some of Colonel Barrington's younger neighbors from the Rockies. There were two basket chairs and a plain redwood table; but in contrast to them a cabinet of old French workmanship stood in one corner bearing books in dainty bindings, and two great silver candlesticks. The shaded lamp was also of the same metal, and the whole room with its faint resinous smell conveyed, in a fashion not uncommon on the prairie, a suggestion of taste and refinement held in check by at least comparative poverty. Colonel Barrington was a widower who had been esteemed a man of wealth, but the founding of Silverdale had made a serious inroad on his finances. Even yet, though he occasionally practiced it, he did not take kindly to economy.

"Yes," said the girl, "I enjoyed it all—and it was so different from the prairie."

There was comprehension, and a trace of sympathy,

in Miss Barrington's nod. "Tell me a little, my dear," she said. There was not a great deal about it in your letters."

Her niece glanced dreamily into the sinking fire as though she would call up the pictures there. "But you know it all—the life I have only had glimpses of. Well, for the first few months I almost lost my head, and was swung right off my feet by the whirl of it. It was then I was, perhaps, just a trifle thoughtless."

The white-haired lady laughed softly. "It is difficult to believe it, Maud."

The girl shook her head reproachfully. "I know what you mean, and perhaps you are right, for that was what Toinette insinuated," she said. "She actually told me that I should be thankful I had a brain since I had no heart. Still, at first I let myself go, and it was delightful—the opera, the dances, and the covered skating-rink with the music and the black ice flashing beneath the lights. The whir of the toboggans down the great slide was finer still, and the torchlight meets of the snowshoe clubs on the mountain. Yes, I think I was really young while it lasted."

"For a month," said the elder. "And after?"

"Then," said the girl slowly, "it all seemed to grow a trifle purposeless, and there was something that spoiled it. Toinette was quite angry and I know her mother wrote you—but it was not my fault, aunt. How was I, a guileless girl from the prairie, to guess that such a man would fling the handkerchief to me?"

The evenness of tone and entire absence of embarrassment was significant. It also pointed to the fact that there was a closer confidence between Maud Barrington and her aunt than often exists between mother and daughter, and the elder lady stroked the lustrous

head that rested against her knee with a little affectionate pride.

"My dear, you know you are beautiful, and you have the cachet that all the Courthornes wear. Still, you could not like him? Tell me about him."

Maud Barrington curled herself up further. "I think I could have liked him, but that was all," she said. "He was nice to look at and did all the little things gracefully; but he had never done anything else, never would, and, I fancy, had never wanted to. Now a man of that kind would very soon pall on me, and I should have lost my temper trying to waken him to his responsibilities."

"And what kind of man would please you?"

Maud Barrington's eyes twinkled, but the fact that she answered at all was a proof of the sympathy between herself and the questioner. "I do not know that I am anxious any of them should," she said. "But since you ask, he would have to be a man first: a toiling, striving animal who could hold his own amidst his fellows wherever he was placed. Secondly, one would naturally prefer a gentleman, though I do not like the word, and one would fancy the combination a trifle rare, because brains and birth do not necessarily tally, and the man educated by the struggle for existence is apt to be taught more than he ever would be at Oxford or in the army. Still, men of that stamp forget a good deal, and learn so much that is undesirable, you see. In fact, I only know one man who would have suited me, and he is debarred by age and affinity—but, because we are so much alike, I can't help fancying that you once knew another."

The smile on Miss Barrington's face, which was still almost beautiful as well as patient, became a trifle wistful.

"There are few better men than my brother, though he is not clever," she said, and dropped her voice a little. "As to the other, he died in India—beside his mountain gun—long ago."

"And you have never forgotten? He must have been worth it—I wonder if loyalty and chivalric faith belong only to the past," said the girl, reaching up a rounded arm and patting her aunt's thin hand. "And now we will be practical. I fancied the head of the settlement looked worried when he met me, and he is not very proficient at hiding his feelings."

Miss Barrington sighed. "I am afraid that is nothing very new, and with wheat steadily falling and our granaries full, he has cause for anxiety. Then the fact that Lance Courthorne has divided your inheritance and is going to settle here has been troubling him."

"The first is the lesser evil," said the girl, with a little laugh. "I wore very short frocks when I last saw Lance in England, and so far as I can remember he had the face of an angel and the temper of a devil. But did not my uncle endeavor to buy him off, and —for I know you have been finding out things—I want you to tell me all about him."

"He would not take the money," said Miss Barrington, and sat in thoughtful silence a space. Then, and perhaps she had a reason, she quietly recounted Courthorne's Canadian history so far as her brother's agents had been able to trace it, not omitting, dainty in thought and speech as she was, one or two incidents which a mother might have kept back from her daughter's ears. Still, it was very seldom that Miss Barrington made a blunder. There was a faint pinkness in her face when she concluded, but she was not surprised when, with a slow, sinuous movement, the girl rose to her feet. Her

cheeks were very slightly flushed, but there was a significant sparkle in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, with utter contempt. "How sickening! Are there men like that?"

There was a little silence, emphasized by the snapping in the stove, and if Miss Barrington had spoken with an object she should have been contented. The girl was imperious in her anger, which was caused by something deeper than startled prudery.

"It is," said the little white-haired lady, "all quite true. Still, I must confess that my brother and myself were a trifle astonished at the report of the lawyer he sent to confer with Lance in Montana. One would almost have imagined that he had of late been trying to make amends."

The girl's face was very scornful. "Could a man with a past like that ever live it down?"

"We have a warrant for believing it," said Miss Barrington quietly, as she laid her hand on her companion's arm. "My dear, I have told you what Lance was, because I felt it was right that you should know; but none of us can tell what he may be, and if the man is honestly trying to lead a different life, all I ask is that you should not wound him by any manifest suspicion. Those who have never been tempted can afford to be merciful."

Maud Barrington laughed somewhat curiously. "You are a very wise woman, aunt, but you are a little transparent now and then," she said. "At least he shall have a fair trial without prejudice or favor—and if he fails, as fail he will, we shall find the means of punishing him."

"We?" said the elder lady, a trifle maliciously.

The girl nodded as she moved towards the doorway,

and then turned a moment with the folds of the big red curtain flung behind her. It forced up the sweeping lines of a figure so delicately molded that its slenderness was scarcely apparent, for Maud Barrington still wore a long somber dress that had assisted in her triumphs in the city. It emphasized the clear pallor of her skin and the brightness of her eyes, as she held herself very erect in a pose which, while assumed in mockery, had yet in it something that was almost imperial.

"Yes," she said. "We. You know who is the power behind the throne at Silverdale, and what the boys call me. And now, good-night. Sleep well, dear."

She went out, and Miss Barrington sat very still gazing with eyes that were curiously thoughtful into the fire. "Princess of the Prairie—and it fits her well," she said and then sighed a little. "And if there is a trace of hardness in the girl it may be fortunate. We all have our troubles—and wheat is going down."

In the meanwhile, late as it was, Colonel Barrington and his chief lieutenant, Gordon Dane, sat in his log-walled smoking-room talking with a man he sold his wheat through in Winnipeg. The room was big and bare. There were a few fine heads of antelope upon the walls, and beneath them an armory of English-made shotguns and rifles, while a row of silver-mounted riding crops, and some handled with ivory, stood in a corner. All these represented amusement, while two or three treatises on veterinary surgery and agriculture, lying amidst English stud-books and racing records, presumably stood for industry. The comparison was significant, and Graham, the Winnipeg wheat-broker, noticed it as he listened patiently to the views of Colonel Barrington, who nevertheless worked hard enough in his own fashion.

Unfortunately it was rather the fashion of the English gentleman than that common on the prairie.

"And now," he said, with a trace of the anxiety he had concealed in his eyes, "I am open to hear what you can do for me."

Graham smiled a little. "It isn't very much, Colonel. I'll take all your wheat off you at three cents down."

Now Barrington did not like the broker's smile. It savored too much of equality, and, though he had already unbent as far as he was capable of doing, he had no great esteem for men of business. Nor did it please him to be addressed as "Colonel."

"That," he said coldly, "is out of the question. I would not sell at the last market price. Besides, you have hitherto acted as my broker."

Graham nodded. "The market price will be less than what I offered you in a week, and I could scarcely sell your wheat at it to-day. I was going to hold it myself, because I can occasionally get a little more from one or two millers who like that special grade. Usual sorts I'm selling for a fall. Quite sure the deal wouldn't suit you?"

Barrington lighted a fresh cigar, though Graham noticed that he had smoked very little of the one he flung away. This was, of course, a trifle, but it is the trifles that count in the aggregate upon the prairie, as they not infrequently do elsewhere.

"I fancy I told you so," he said.

The broker glanced at Dane, who was a big, bronzed man, and, since Barrington could not see him, shook his head deprecatingly.

"You can consider that decided, Graham," he said. "Still, can you as a friendly deed give us any notion of

what to do? As you know, farming, especially at Silverdale, costs money, and the banks are demanding an iniquitous interest just now, while we are carrying over a good deal of wheat."

Graham nodded. He understood why farming was unusually expensive at Silverdale, and was, in recollection of past favors, inclined to be disinterestedly friendly.

"If I were you, I would sell right along for forward delivery at a few cents under the market."

"It is a trifle difficult to see how that would help us," said Barrington, with a little gesture of irritation, for it almost seemed that the broker was deriding him.

"No!" said the man from Winnipeg, "on the contrary, it's quite easy. Now I can predict that wheat will touch lower prices still before you have to make delivery, and it isn't very difficult to figure out the profit on selling a thing for a dollar and then buying it, when you have to produce it, at ninety cents. Of course, there is a risk of the market going against you, but you could buy at the first rise, and you've your stock to dole out in case anybody cornered you."

"That," said Dane thoughtfully, "appears quite sensible. Of course, it's a speculation, but presumably we couldn't be much worse off than we are. Have you any objections to the scheme, sir?"

Barrington laid down his cigar, and glanced with astonished severity at the speaker. "Unfortunately, I have. We are wheat growers and not wheat stock jugglers. Our purpose is to farm, and not swindle and lie in the wheat pits for decimal differences. I have a distinct antipathy to anything of the kind."

"But, sir," said Dane, and Barrington stopped him with a gesture.

"I would," he said, "as soon turn gambler. Still,

while it has always been a tradition at Silverdale that the head of the settlement's lead is to be followed, that need not prevent you putting on the gloves with the wheat-ring blacklegs in Winnipeg."

Dane blushed a little under his tan, and then smiled as he remembered the one speculative venture his leader had indulged in, for Colonel Barrington was a somewhat hot-tempered and vindictive man. He made a little gesture of deprecation as he glanced at Graham, who straightened himself suddenly in his chair.

"I should not think of doing so in face of your opinion, sir," he said. "There is an end to the thing, Graham!"

The broker's face was a trifle grim. "I gave you good advice out of friendship, Colonel, and there are men with dollars to spare who would value a hint from me," he said. "Still, as it doesn't seem to strike you the right way, I've no use for arguing. Keep your wheat—and pay bank interest if you want any help to carry over."

"Thanks," said Dane quietly. "They charge tolerably high, but I've seen what happens to the man who meddles with the mortgage-broker."

Graham nodded. "Well, as I'm starting out at six o'clock, it's time I was asleep," he said. "Good-night to you, Colonel."

Barrington shook hands with Graham, and then sighed a little when he went out. "I believe the man is honest, and he is a guest of mine, or I should have dressed him down," he said. "I don't like the way things are going, Dane, and the fact is we must find accommodation somewhere, because now I have to pay out so much on my ward's account to that confounded Courthorne it is necessary to raise more dollars than the

banks will give me. Now, there was a broker fellow wrote me a very civil letter."

Dane, who was a thoughtful man, ventured to lay his hand upon his leader's arm. "Keep yourself and Miss Barrington out of those fellows' clutches at any cost," he said.

Barrington shook off his hand, and looked at him sternly. "Are you not a trifle young to adopt that tone?" he said.

Dane nodded. "No doubt I am, but I've seen a little of mortgage jobbing. You must try to overlook it. I did not mean to offend."

He went out, and, while Colonel Barrington sat down before a sheaf of accounts, sprang into a waiting sleigh. "It's no use, we've got to go through," he said to the lad who shook the reins. "Graham made a very sensible suggestion, but our respected leader came down on him, as he did on me. You see, one simply can't talk to the Colonel, and it's unfortunate Miss Barrington didn't marry that man in Montreal."

"I don't know," said the lad. "Of course, there are not many girls like Maud Barrington, but is it necessary she should go outside Silverdale?"

Dane laughed. "None of us would be old enough for Miss Barrington when we were fifty. The trouble is, that we spend half our time in play, and I've a notion it's a man, and not a gentleman dilettante, she's looking for."

"Isn't that a curious way of putting it?" asked his companion.

Dane nodded. "It may be the right one. Woman is as she was made, and I've had more than a suspicion lately that a little less refinement would not come amiss at Silverdale. Anyway, I hope she'll find him, for it's a

man with grit and energy, who could put a little desirable pressure on the Colonel occasionally, we're all wanting. Of course, I'm backing my leader, though it's going to cost me a good deal, but it's time he had somebody to help him."

"He would never accept assistance," said the lad thoughtfully. "That is, unless the man who offered it was, or became by marriage, one of the dynasty."

"Of course," said Dane. "That's why I'm inclined to take a fatherly interest in Miss Barrington's affair. It's a misfortune we've heard nothing very reassuring about Courthorne."

CHAPTER VII

WINSTON'S DECISION

FARMER WINSTON crossed the frontier without molestation and spent one night in a little wooden town, where several people he did not speak to apparently recognized him. Then he pushed on southwards, and passed a week in the especially desolate settlement he had been directed to. A few dilapidated frame houses rose out of the white wilderness beside the broad beaten trail, and, for here the prairie rolled south in long rises like the waves of a frozen sea, a low wooden building on the crest of one cut the skyline a league away. It served as outpost for a squadron of United States cavalry, and the troopers daily maligned the Government which had sent them into that desolation on police duty.

There was nothing else visible but a few dusky groves of willows and the dazzling snow. The ramshackle wooden hotel was rather more than usually badly-kept and comfortless, and Winston, who had managed to conciliate his host, felt relieved one afternoon when the latter flung down the cards disgustedly.

"I guess I've had enough," he said. "Playing for stakes of this kind isn't good enough for you!"

Winston laughed a little to hide his resentment, as he said, "I don't quite understand."

"Pshaw!" said the American, with a contemptuous gesture. "Three times out of four I've spoiled your hand, and if I didn't know that black horse I'd take

you for some blamed Canadian rancher. You didn't handle the pictures that way when you stripped the boys to the hide at Regent, Mr. Courthorne."

"Regent?" said Winston.

The hotel-keeper laughed. "Oh, yes," he said. "I wouldn't go back there too soon, any way. The boys don't seem quite contented, and I don't figure they would be very nice to you. Well, now, I've no use for fooling with a man who's too proud to take my dollars, and I've a pair of horses just stuffed with wickedness in the stable. There's not much you don't know about a beast, any way, and you can take them out a league or two if you feel like it."

Winston, who had grown very tired of his host, was glad of any distraction, especially as he surmised that while the man had never seen Courthorne, he knew rather more than he did himself about his doings. Accordingly, he got into the sleigh that was brought out by and by, and enjoyed the struggle with the half-tamed team, which stood with ears laid back, prepared for conflict. Oats had been very plentiful, and prices low that season. Winston, who knew at least as much about a horse as Lance Courthorne, however, bent them to his will, and the team were trotting quietly through the shadow of a big birch bluff a league from town, when he heard a faint clip-clop coming down the trail behind him. It led straight beneath the leafless branches, and was beaten smooth and firm, while Winston, who had noticed already that whenever he strayed any distance from the hotel there was a mounted cavalryman somewhere in the vicinity, shook the reins.

The team swung into faster stride, the cold wind whistled past him, and the snow whirled up from beneath the runners, but while he listened, the rhythmic

drumming behind him also quickened a little. Then a faintly musical jingle of steel accompanied the beat of hoofs, and Winston glanced about him with a little laugh of annoyance. The dusk was creeping across the prairie, and a pale star or two growing into brilliancy in the cloudless sweep of indigo.

"It's getting a trifle tiresome. I'll find out what the fellow wants," he said.

Wheeling the team he drove back the way he came, and, when a dusky object materialized out of the shadows beneath the birches, swung the horses right across the trail. The snow lay deep on either side of it just there, with a sharp crust upon its surface, which rendered it inadvisable to take a horse round the sleigh. The mounted man accordingly drew bridle, and the jingle and rattle betokened his profession, though it was already too dark to see him clearly.

"Hallo!" he said. "Been buying this trail up, stranger?"

"No," said Winston quietly, though he still held his team across the way. "Still, I've got the same right as any other citizen to walk or drive along it without anybody prowling after me, and just now I want to know if there is a reason I should be favored with your company."

The trooper laughed a little. "I guess there is. It's down in the orders that whoever's on patrol near the settlement should keep his eye on you. You see, if you lit out of here we would want to know just where you were going to."

"I am," said Winston, "a Canadian citizen, and I came out here for quietness."

"Well," said the other, "you're an American, too. Any way, when you were in a tight place down in Regent

there, you told the boys so. Now, no sensible man would boast of being a Britisher unless it was helping him to play out his hand."

Winston kept his temper. "I want a straight answer. Can you tell me what you and the boys are trailing me for?"

"No," said the trooper. "Still, I guess our commander could. If you don't know of any reason, you might ask him."

Winston tightened his grip on the reins. "I'll ride back with you to the outpost now."

The trooper shook his bridle, and trotted behind the sleigh, while, as it swung up and down over the billowy rises of the prairie, Winston became sensible of a curious expectancy. The bare, hopeless life he had led seemed to have slipped behind him, and though he suspected that there was no great difference between his escort and a prisoner's guard, the old love of excitement he once fancied he had outgrown forever, awoke again within him. Anything that was different from the past would be a relief, and the man who had for eight long years of strenuous toil practiced the grimmest self-denial wondered with a quickening of all his faculties what the future, that could not be more colorless, might have in store for him.

It was dark, and very cold, when they reached the wooden building, but Winston's step was lighter, and his spirits more buoyant than they had been for some months, when, handing the sleigh over to an orderly, he walked into the guard-room, where bronzed men in uniform glanced at him curiously. Then he was shown into a bare log-walled hall, where a young man in blue uniform with a weather-darkened face was writing at a table.

"I've been partly expecting a visit," he said. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Courthorne."

Winston laughed with a very good intimation of the outlaw's recklessness, and wondered the while because it cost him no effort. He, who had, throughout the last two adverse seasons, seldom smiled at all, and then but grimly, experienced the same delight in an adventure that he had done when he came out to Canada.

"I don't know that I can return the compliment just yet," he said. "I have one or two things to ask you."

The young soldier smiled good-humoredly, as he flung a cigar case on the table. "Oh, sit down and shake those furs off," he said. "I'm not a worrying policeman, and we're white men, any way. If you'd been twelve months in this forsaken place, you'd know what I'm feeling. Take a smoke, and start in with your questions when you feel like it."

Winston lighted a cigar, flung himself down in a hide chair, and stretched out his feet towards the stove. "In the first place, I want to know why your boys are shadowing me. You see, you couldn't arrest me unless our folks in the Dominion had got their papers through."

The officer nodded. "No. We couldn't lay hands on you, and we only had orders to see where you went to when you left this place, so the folks there could corral you if they got the papers. That's about the size of it at present, but, as I've sent a trooper over to Regent, I'll know more to-morrow."

Winston laughed. "It may appear a little astonishing, but I haven't the faintest notion why the police in Canada should worry about me. Is there any reason you shouldn't tell me?"

The officer looked at him thoughtfully. "Bluff? I'm quite smart at it myself," he said.

"No," and Winston shook his head. "It's a straight question. I want to know."

"Well," said the other, "it couldn't do much harm if I told you. You were running whisky a little while ago, and, though the folks didn't seem to suspect it, you had a farmer or a rancher for a partner—it appears he has mixed up things for you."

"Winston?" and the farmer turned to roll the cigar which did not need it between his fingers.

"That's the man," said his companion. "Well, though I guess it's no news to you, the police came down upon your friends at a river-crossing, and farmer Winston put a bullet into a young trooper, Shannon, I fancy."

Winston sat upright, and the blood that surged to his forehead sank from it suddenly, and left his face gray with anger.

"Good Lord!" he said hoarsely. "He killed him?"

"Yes, sir," said the officer. "Killing's not quite the word, because one shot would have been enough to free him of the lad, and the rancher fired twice into him. They figured, from the way the trooper was lying and the footprints, that he meant to finish him."

The farmer's face was very grim as he said, "They were sure it was Winston?"

"Yes," and the soldier watched him curiously. "Any way, they were sure of his horse, and it was Winston's rifle. Another trooper nearly got him, and he left it behind him. It wasn't killing, for the trooper don't seem to have had a show at all, and I'm glad to see it makes you kind of sick. Only that one of the troopers allows he was trailing you at a time which shows you had no hand in the thing, you wouldn't be sitting there smoking that cigar."

It was almost a minute before Winston could trust his voice. Then he said slowly, "And what do they want me for?"

"I guess they don't quite know whether they do or not," said the officer. "They crawl slow in Canada. In the meanwhile they wanted to know where you were, so they could take out papers if anything turned up against you."

"And Winston?" said the farmer.

"Got away with a trooper close behind him. The rest of them had headed him off from the prairie, and he took to the river. Went through the ice and drowned himself, though as there was a blizzard nobody quite saw the end of him, and in case there was any doubt they've got a warrant out. Farmer Winston's dead, and if he isn't he soon will be, for the troopers have got their net right across the prairie, and the Canadians don't fool time away as we do when it comes to hanging anybody. The tale seems to have worried you."

Winston sat rigidly still and silent for almost a minute. Then he rose up with a curious little shake of his shoulders.

"And farmer Winston's dead. Well, he had a hard life. I knew him rather well," he said. "Thank you for the story. On my word this is the first time I've heard it, and now it's time I was going."

The officer laughed a little. "Sit right down again. Now, there's something about you that makes me like you, and as I can't talk to the boys, I'll give you the best supper we can raise in the whole forsaken country, and you can camp here until to-morrow. It's an arrangement that will meet the views of everybody, because I'll know whether the Canadians want you or not, in the morning."

Winston did not know what prompted him to agree, but it all seemed part of a purpose that impelled him against his reasoning will, and he sat still beside the stove, while his host went out to give orders respecting supper and the return of the sleigh. He was also glad to be alone a while, for now and then a fit of anger shook him as he saw how he had been duped by Courthorne. He had heard Shannon's story, and, remembering it, could fancy that Courthorne had planned the trooper's destruction with a devilish cunning that recognized by what means the blame could be laid upon a guiltless man. Winston's face became mottled with gray again as he realized that if he revealed his identity he had nothing but his word to offer in proof of his innocence.

Still, it was anger and not fear that stirred him, for nobody could arrest a man who was dead, and there was no reason that would render it undesirable for him to remain so. His farm would when sold realize the money borrowed upon it, and the holder of the mortgage had received a profitable interest already. Had the unforeseen not happened, Winston would have held out to the end of the struggle, but now he had no regret that this was out of the question. Fate had been too strong for him as farmer Winston, but it might deal more kindly with him as the outlaw Courthorne. He could also make a quick decision, and when the officer returned to say that supper was ready, he rose with a smile.

They sat down to a meal that was barbaric in its simplicity and abundance, for men live and eat in Homeric fashion in the Northwest, and when the green tea was finished and the officer pushed the whisky across, his guest laughed as he filled his glass.

"Here's better fortune to farmer Winston!" he said.

The officer stared at him. "No, sir," he said. "If the old folks taught me right, Winston's in——"

A curious smile flickered in the farmer's eyes. "No," he said slowly. "He was tolerably near it once or twice when he was alive, and, because of what he went through then, there may be something better in store for him."

His companion appeared astonished, but said nothing further until he brought out the cards. They played for an hour beside the snapping stove, and then, when Winston flung a trump away, the officer groaned.

"I guess," he said disgustedly, "you're not well to-night or something is worrying you."

Winston looked up with a little twinkle in his eyes. "I don't know that there's very much wrong with me."

"Then," said the officer decisively, "if the boys down at Regent know enough to remember what trumps are, you're not Lance Courthorne. Now, after what I'd heard of you, I'd have put up fifty dollars for the pleasure of watching your game—and it's not worth ten cents when I've seen it."

Winston laughed. "Sit down and talk," he said. "One isn't always in his usual form, and there are folks who get famous too easily."

They talked until nearly midnight, sitting close to the stove, while a doleful wind that moaned without drove the dust of snow pattering against the windows, and the shadows grew darker in the corners of the great log-walled room each time the icy draughts set the lamp flickering. Then the officer, rising, expressed the feelings of his guest as he said, "It's a forsaken country, and I'm thankful one can sleep and forget it."

He had, however, an honorable calling, and a welcome from friend and kinsman awaiting him when he

went East again, to revel in the life of the cities, but the man who followed him silently to the sleeping-room had nothing but a half-instinctive assurance that the future could not well be harder or more lonely than the past had been. Still, farmer Winston was a man of courage with a quiet belief in himself, and in ten minutes he was fast asleep.

When he came down to breakfast his host was already seated with a bundle of letters before him, and one addressed to Courthorne lay unopened by Winston's plate. The officer nodded when he saw him.

"The trooper has come in with the mail, and your friends in Canada are not going to worry you," he said. "Now, if you feel like staying here a few days, it would be a favor to me."

Winston had in the meanwhile opened the envelope. He knew that when once the decision was made, there could only be peril in half-measures, and his eyes grew thoughtful as he read. The letter had been written by a Winnipeg lawyer from a little town not very far away, and requested Courthorne to meet and confer with him respecting certain suggestions made by a Colonel Barrington. Winston decided to take the risk.

"I'm sorry, but I have got to go into Annerly at once," he said.

"Then," said the officer, "I'll drive you. I've some stores to get down there."

They started after breakfast, but it was dusk next day when they reached the little town, and Winston walked quietly into a private room of the wooden hotel, where a middle-aged man with a shrewd face sat waiting him. The big nickeled lamp flickered in the draughts that found their way in, and Winston was glad of it, though he was outwardly very collected. The stubborn

patience and self-control with which he had faced the loss of his wheat crops and frozen stock stood him in good stead now. He fancied the lawyer seemed a trifle astonished at his appearance, and sat down wondering whether he had previously spoken to Courthorne, until the question was answered for him.

"Although I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, I have acted as Colonel Barrington's legal adviser ever since he settled at Silverdale, and am, therefore, well posted as to his affairs, which are, of course, connected with those of your own family," said the lawyer. "We can accordingly talk with greater freedom, and I hope without the acerbity which in your recent communications somewhat annoyed the Colonel."

"Well," said Winston, who had never heard of Colonel Barrington, "I am ready to listen."

The lawyer drummed on the table. "It might be best to come to the point at once," he said. "Colonel Barrington does not deem it convenient that you should settle at Silverdale, and would be prepared to offer you a reasonable sum to relinquish your claim."

"My claim?" said Winston, who remembered having heard of the Silverdale Colony which lay several hundred miles away.

"Of course," said the lawyer. "The legacy lately left you by Roger Courthorne. I have brought you a schedule of the wheat in store, and amounts due to you on various sales made. You will also find the acreage, stock, and implements detailed at a well-known appraiser's valuation, which you could of course confirm, and Colonel Barrington would hand you a check for half the total now. He, however, asks four years to pay the balance in, which would carry bank interest in the meanwhile."

Winston, who was glad of the excuse, spent at least ten minutes studying the paper, and realized that it referred to a large and well-appointed farm, though it occurred to him that the crop was a good deal smaller than it should have been. He noticed this as it were instinctively, for his brain was otherwise very busy.

"Colonel Barrington seems somewhat anxious to get rid of me," he said. "You see, this land is mine by right."

"Yes," said the lawyer. "Colonel Barrington does not dispute it, though I am of opinion that he might have done so under one clause of the will. I do not think we need discuss his motives."

Winston moistened his lips with his tongue, and his lips quivered a little. He had hitherto been an honest man, and now it was impossible for him to take the money. It, however, appeared equally impossible to reveal his identity and escape the halter, and he felt that the dead man had wronged him horribly. He was entitled at least to safety by way of compensation, for by passing as Courthorne he would avoid recognition as Winston.

"Still I do not know how I have offended Colonel Barrington," he said.

"I would sooner," said the lawyer, "not go into that. It is, I fancy, fifteen years since Colonel Barrington saw you, but he desired me to find means of tracing your Canadian record, and did not seem pleased with it. Nor, at the risk of offending you, could I deem him unduly prejudiced."

"In fact," said Winston dryly, "this man who has not seen me for fifteen years is desirous of withholding what is mine from me at almost any cost."

The lawyer nodded. "There is nothing to be gained

by endeavoring to controvert it. Colonel Barrington is also, as you know, a somewhat determined gentleman."

Winston laughed, for he was essentially a stubborn man, and felt little kindliness towards any one connected with Courthorne, as the Colonel evidently was.

"I fancy I am not entirely unlike him in that respect," he said. "What you have told me makes me the more determined to follow my own inclination. Is there any one else at Silverdale prejudiced against me?"

The lawyer fell into the trap. "Miss Barrington, of course, takes her brother's view, and her niece would scarcely go counter to them. She must have been a very young girl when she last saw you, but from what I know of her character I should expect her to support the Colonel."

"Well," said Winston, "I want to think over the thing. We will talk again to-morrow. You would require me to establish my identity, any way?"

"The fact that a famous inquiry agent has traced your movements down to a week or two ago, and told me where to find you, will render that simple," said the lawyer dryly.

Winston sat up late that night turning over the papers the lawyer left him and thinking hard. It was evident that in the meanwhile he must pass as Courthorne, but as the thought of taking the money revolted him, the next step led to the occupation of the dead man's property. The assumption of it would apparently do nobody a wrong, while he felt that Courthorne had taken so much from him that the farm at Silverdale would be a very small reparation. It was not, he saw, a great inheritance, but one that in the right hands could be made

profitable, and Winston, who had fought a plucky fight with obsolete and worthless implements and indifferent teams, felt that he could do a great deal with what was, as it were, thrust upon him at Silverdale. It was not avarice that tempted him, though he knew he was tempted now, but a longing to find a fair outlet for his energies, and show what, once given the chance that most men had, he could do. He had stinted himself and toiled almost as a beast of burden, but now he could use his brains in place of wringing the last effort out of overtaxed muscle. He had also during the long struggle lost to some extent his clearness of vision, and only saw himself as a lonely man fighting for his own hand with fate against him. Now, when prosperity was offered him, it seemed but folly to stand aside when he could stretch out a strong hand and take it.

During the last hour he sat almost motionless, the issue hung in the balance, and he laid himself down still undecided. Still, he had lived long in primitive fashion in close touch with the soil, and sank, as most men would not have done, into restful sleep. The sun hung red above the rim of the prairie when he awakened, and going down to breakfast found the lawyer waiting for him.

"You can tell Colonel Barrington I'm coming to Silverdale," he said.

The lawyer looked at him curiously. "Would there be any use in asking you to reconsider?"

Winston laughed. "No," he said. "Now, I rather like the way you talked to me, and, if it wouldn't be disloyalty to the Colonel, I should be pleased if you would undertake to put me in due possession of my property."

He said nothing further, and the lawyer sat down to write Colonel Barrington.

"Mr. Courthorne proves obdurate," he said. "He is, however, by no means the type of man I expected to find, and I venture to surmise that you will eventually discover him to be a less undesirable addition to Silverdale than you are at present inclined to fancy."

CHAPTER VIII

WINSTON COMES TO SILVERDALE

THERE was warmth and brightness in the cedar-boarded general room of Silverdale Grange, and most of the company gathered there basked in it contentedly after their drive through the bitter night. Those who came from the homesteads lying farthest out had risked frost-nipped hands and feet, for when Colonel Barrington held a levée at the Grange nobody felt equal to refusing his invitation. Neither scorching heat nor utter cold might excuse compliance with the wishes of the founder of Silverdale, and it was not until Dane, the big middle-aged bachelor, had spoken very plainly, that he consented to receive his guests in time of biting frost dressed otherwise than as they would have appeared in England.

Dane was the one man in the settlement who dare remonstrate with its ruler, but it was a painful astonishment to the latter when he said in answer to one invitation, "I have never been frost-bitten, sir, and I stand the cold well, but one or two of the lads are weak in the chest, and this climate was never intended for bare-shouldered women. Hence, if I come, I shall dress myself to suit it."

Colonel Barrington stared at him for almost a minute, and then shook his head. "Have it your own way," he said. "Understand that in itself I care very little for dress, but it is only by holding fast to every traditional

nicety we can prevent ourselves sinking into Western barbarism, and I am horribly afraid of the thin end of the wedge."

Dane having gained his point said nothing further, for he was one of the wise and silent men who know when to stop, and that evening he sat in a corner watching his leader thoughtfully, for there was anxiety in the Colonel's face. Barrington sat silent near the ample hearth whose heat would scarcely have kept water from freezing but for the big stove, and disdaining the dispensation made his guests, he was clad conventionally, though the smooth black fabric clung about him more tightly than it had once been intended to do. His sister stood, with the stamp of a not wholly vanished beauty still clinging to her gentle face, talking to one or two matrons from outlying farms, and his niece by a little table turning over Eastern photographs with a few young girls. She, too, wore black in deference to the Colonel's taste, which was somber, and the garment she had laughed at as a compromise left uncovered a narrow strip of ivory shoulder and enhanced the polished whiteness of her neck. A slender string of pearls gleamed softly on the satiny skin, but Maud Barrington wore no other adornment, and did not need it. She had inherited the Courthorne comeliness, and the Barringtons she sprang from on her father's side had always borne the stamp of distinction.

A young girl sat at the piano singing in a thin reedy voice, while an English lad waited with the ill-concealed jealousy of a too officious companion to turn over the music by her side. Other men, mostly young, with weather-bronzed faces, picturesque in embroidered deerskin or velvet lounge jackets, were scattered about the room, and all were waiting for the eight o'clock dinner,

which replaced the usual prairie supper at Silverdale. They were growers of wheat who combined a good deal of amusement with a little, not very profitable, farming, and most of them possessed a large share of insular English pride and a somewhat depleted exchequer.

Presently Dane crossed over, and sat down by Colonel Barrington. "You are silent, sir, and not looking very well to-night," he said.

Barrington nodded gravely, for he had a respect for the one man who occasionally spoke plain truth to him. "The fact is, I am growing old," he said, and then added, with what was only an apparent lack of connection, "Wheat is down three cents, and money tighter than ever."

Dane looked thoughtful, and noticed the older man's glance in his niece's direction, as he said, "I am afraid there are difficult times before us."

"I have no doubt we shall weather them as we have done before," said the Colonel. "Still, I can't help admitting that just now I feel—a little tired—and am commencing to think we should have been better prepared for the struggle had we worked a trifle harder during the recent era of prosperity. I could wish there were older heads on the shoulders of those who will come after me."

Just then Maud Barrington glanced at them, and Dane, who could not remember having heard his leader talk in that fashion before, and could guess his anxieties, was a little touched as he noticed his attempt at sprightliness. As it happened, one of the lads at the piano commenced a song of dogs and horses that had little to recommend it but the brave young voice.

"They have the right spirit, sir," he said.

"Of course!" said Barrington. "They are English

lads, but I think a little more is required. Thank God we have not rated the dollar too high, but it is possible we have undervalued its utility, and I fear I have only taught them to be gentlemen."

"That is a good deal, sir," Dane said quietly.

"It is. Still, a gentleman, in the restricted sense, is somewhat of an anachronism on the prairie, and it is too late to begin again. In the usual course of nature I must lay down my charge presently, and that is why I feel the want of a more capable successor, whom they would follow because of his connection with mine and me."

Dane looked thoughtful. "If I am not taking a liberty—you still consider the one apparently born to fill the place quite unsuitable?"

"Yes," said Barrington quietly. "I fear there is not a redeeming feature in Courthorne's character."

Neither said anything further, until there was a tapping at the door, and, though this was a most unusual spectacle on the prairie, a trim English maid in white-banded dress stood in the opening.

"Mr. Courthorne, Miss Barrington," she said.

Now Silverdale had adopted one Western custom in that no chance guest was ever kept waiting, and the music ceased suddenly, while the stillness was very suggestive, when a man appeared in the doorway. He wore one of the Scandinavian leather jackets which are not uncommon in that country, and when his eyes had become accustomed to the light, moved forward with a quiet deliberation that was characterized neither by graceful ease nor the restraint of embarrassment. His face was almost the color of a Blackfeet's, his eyes steady and gray, but those of the men who watched him were turned the next moment upon the Colonel's sister, who rose to receive

him, slight, silver-haired, and faded, but still stamped with a simple dignity that her ancient silks and laces curiously enhanced. Then there was a silence that could be felt, for all realized that a good deal depended on the stranger's first words and the fashion of his reception by Miss Barrington and the Colonel.

Winston, as it happened, felt this too, and something more. It was eight years since he had stood before an English lady, and he surmised that there could not be many to compare with this one, while after his grim lonely life an intangible something that seemed to emanate from her gracious serenity compelled his homage. Then as she smiled at him and held out her hand, he was for a moment sensible of an almost overwhelming confusion. It passed as suddenly, for this was a man of quick perceptions, and remembering that Courthorne had now and then displayed some of the grace of by-gone days he yielded to a curious impulse, and, stooping, kissed the little withered fingers.

"I have," he said, "to thank you for a welcome that does not match my poor deserts, madam."

Then Dane, standing beside his leader, saw the grimness grow a trifle less marked in his eyes. "It is in the blood," he said half-aloud, but Dane heard and afterwards remembered it.

In the meanwhile Miss Barrington had turned from the stranger to her niece. "It is a very long time since you have seen Lance, Maud, and, though I knew his mother well, I am less fortunate, because this is our first meeting," she said. "I wonder if you still remember my niece?"

Now, Winston had been gratified by his first success, and was about to venture on the answer that it was impossible to forget; but when he turned towards the very

stately young woman in the long black dress whose eyes had a sardonic gleam, and wondered whether he had ever seen anybody so comely or less inclined to be companionable, it was borne in upon him that any speech of the kind would be distinctly out of place. Accordingly, and because there was no hand held out in this case, he contented himself with a little bend of his head. Then he was presented to the Colonel, who was distantly cordial, and Winston was thankful when the maid appeared in the doorway again, to announce that dinner was ready. Miss Barrington laid her hand upon his arm.

"You will put up with an old woman's company tonight?" she said.

Winston glanced down deprecatingly at his attire. "I must explain that I had no intention of trespassing on your hospitality," he said. "I purposed going on to my own homestead, and only called to acquaint Colonel Barrington with my arrival."

Miss Barrington laughed pleasantly. "That," she said, "was neither dutiful nor friendly. I should have fancied you would also have desired to pay your respects to my niece and me."

Winston was not quite sure what he answered, but he drew in a deep breath, for he had made the plunge and felt that the worst was over. His companion evidently noticed the gasp of relief.

"It was something of an ordeal?" she said.

Winston looked down upon her gravely, and Miss Barrington noticed a steadiness in his eyes she had not expected to see. "It was, and I feel guilty because I was horribly afraid," he said. "Now I only wonder if you will always be equally kind to me."

Miss Barrington smiled a little, but the man fancied there was a just perceptible tightening of the hand upon

his arm. "I would like to be, for your mother's sake," she said.

Winston understood that while Courthorne's iniquities were not to be brought up against him, the little gentle-voiced lady had but taken him on trial; but, perhaps because it was so long since any woman had spoken kindly words to him, his heart went out towards her, and he felt a curious desire to compel her good opinion. Then he found himself seated near the head of the long table, with Maud Barrington on his other hand, and had an uncomfortable feeling that most of the faces were turned somewhat frequently in his direction. It is also possible that he would have betrayed himself, had he been burdened with self-consciousness, but the long, bitter struggle he had fought alone, had purged him of petty weaknesses and left him the closer grasp of essential things, with the strength of character which is one and the same in all men who possess it, whatever may be their upbringing.

During a lull in the voices, Maud Barrington, who may have felt it incumbent on her to show him some scant civility, turned towards him as she said, "I am afraid our conversation will not appeal to you. Partly because there is so little else to interest us, we talk wheat throughout the year at Silverdale."

"Well," said Winston with a curious little smile, "wheat as a topic is not quite new to me. In fact, I know almost more about cereals than some folks would care to do."

"In the shape of elevator warrants or Winnipeg market margins, presumably?"

Winston's eyes twinkled, though he understood the implication. "No," he said. "The wheat I handled was in 250-pound bags, and I occasionally grew some-

what tired of pitching them into a wagon, while my speculations usually consisted in committing it to the prairie soil, in the hope of reaping forty bushels to the acre and then endeavoring to be content with ten. It is conceivable that operations on the Winnipeg market are less laborious as well as more profitable, but I have had no opportunity of trying them."

Miss Barrington looked at him steadily, and Winston felt the blood surge to his forehead as he remembered having heard of a certain venture made by Courthorne which brought discredit on one or two men connected with the affairs of a grain elevator. It was evident that Miss Barrington had also heard of it, and no man cares to stand convicted of falsification in the eyes of a very pretty girl. Still, he roused himself with an effort.

"It is neither wise nor charitable to believe all one hears," he said.

The girl smiled a little, but the man still winced inwardly under her clear brown eyes, that would, he fancied, have been very scornful had they been less indifferent.

"I do not remember mentioning having heard anything," she said. "Were you not a trifle premature, in face of the proverb?"

Winston's face was a trifle grim, though he laughed. "I'm afraid I was; but I am warned," he said. "Excuses are, after all, not worth much, and when I make my defense it will be before a more merciful judge."

Maud Barrington's curiosity was piqued. Lance Courthorne, outcast and gambler, was at least a different stamp of man from the type she had been used to, and, being a woman, the romance that was interwoven with his somewhat iniquitous career was not without its attractions for her.

"I did not know that you included farming among your talents, and should have fancied you would have found it—monotonous," she said.

"I did," and the provoking smile still flickered in Winston's eyes. "Are not all strictly virtuous occupations usually so?"

"It is probably a question of temperament. I have, of course, heard sardonic speeches of the kind before, and felt inclined to wonder whether those who made them were qualified to form an opinion."

Winston nodded, but there was a little ring in his voice. "Perhaps I laid myself open to the thrust; but have you any right to assume I have never followed a commendable profession?"

No answer was immediately forthcoming, but Winston did wisely when, in place of waiting, he turned to Miss Barrington. He had left her niece irritated, but the trace of anger she felt was likely to enhance her interest. The meal, however, was a trial to him, for he had during eight long years lived for the most part apart from all his kind, a lonely toiler, and now was constrained to personate a man known to be almost dangerously skillful with his tongue. At first sight the task appeared almost insuperably difficult, but Winston was a clever man, and felt all the thrill of one playing a risky game just then. Perhaps it was due to excitement that a readiness he had never fancied himself capable of came to him in his need, and, when at last the ladies rose, he felt that he had not slipped perilously. Still, he found how dry his lips had grown when somebody poured him a glass of wine. Then he became sensible that Colonel Barrington, who had apparently been delivering a lengthy monologue, was addressing him.

"The outlook is sufficient to cause us some anxiety,"

he said. "We are holding large stocks, and I can see no prospect of anything but a steady fall in wheat. It is, however, presumably a little too soon to ask your opinion."

"Well," said Winston, "while I am prepared to act upon it, I would recommend it to others with some diffidence. No money can be made at present by farming, but I see no reason why we should not endeavor to cut our losses by selling forward down. If caught by a sudden rally, we could fall back on the grain we hold."

There was a sudden silence, until Dane said softly, "That is exactly what one of the cleverest brokers in Winnipeg recommended."

"I think," said Colonel Barrington, "you heard my answer. I am inclined to fancy that such a measure would not be advisable or fitting, Mr. Courthorne. You, however, presumably know very little about the practical aspect of the wheat question."

Winston smiled. "On the contrary, I know a great deal."

"You do?" said Barrington sharply, and while a blunderer would have endeavored to qualify his statement, Winston stood by it.

"You are evidently not aware, sir, that I have tried my hand at farming, though not very successfully."

"That at least," said Barrington dryly, as he rose, "is quite creditable."

When they went into the smaller room, Winston crossed over to where Maud Barrington sat alone, and looked down upon her gravely. "One discovers that frankness is usually best," he said. "Now, I would not like to feel that you had determined to be unfriendly with me."

Maud Barrington fixed a pair of clear brown eyes

upon his face, and the faintest trace of astonishment crept into them. She was a woman with high principles, but neither a fool nor a prude, and she saw no sign of dissolute living there. The man's gaze was curiously steady, his skin clear and brown, and his sinewy form suggested a capacity for, and she almost fancied an acquaintance with, physical toil. Yet he had already denied the truth to her. Winston, on his part, saw a very fair face with wholesome pride in it, and felt that the eyes which were coldly contemptuous now could, if there was a warrant for it, grow very gentle.

"Would it be of any moment if I were?" she said.

"Yes," said Winston quietly. "There are two people here it is desirable for me to stand well with, and the first of them, your aunt, has, I fancy, already decided to give me a fair trial. She told me it was for my mother's sake. Now, I can deal with your uncle, I think."

The girl smiled a little. "Are you quite sure? Everybody does not find it easy to get on with Colonel Barrington. His code is somewhat Draconic, and he is rather determined in his ways."

Winston nodded. "He is a man, and I hope to convince him I have at least a right to toleration. That leaves only you. The rest don't count. They will come round by and by, you see."

The little forceful gesture, with which he concluded, pleased Maud Barrington. It was free from vanity, but conveyed an assurance that he knew his own value.

"No friendship that is lightly given is worth very much," she said. "I could decide better in another six months. Now it is perhaps fortunate that Colonel Barrington is waiting for us to make up his four at whist."

Winston allowed a faint gesture of dismay to escape him. "Must I play?"

"Yes," said the girl, smiling. "Whist is my uncle's hobby and he is enthusiastic over a clever game."

Winston groaned inwardly. "And I am a fool at whist."

"Then it was poker you played?" and again a faint trace of anger crept into the girl's eyes.

Winston shook his head. "No," he said. "I had few opportunities of indulging in expensive luxuries."

"I think we had better take our places," said Maud Barrington, with unveiled contempt.

Winston's forehead grew a trifle hot, and when he sat down Barrington glanced at him. "I should explain that we never allow stakes of any kind at Silverdale," he said. "Some of the lads sent out to me have been a trifle extravagant in the old country."

He dealt out the cards, but a trace of bewildered irritation crept into his eyes as the game proceeded, and once or twice he appeared to check an exclamation of astonishment, while at last he glanced reproachfully at Winston.

"My dear sir! Still, you have ridden a long way," he said, laying his finger on a king.

Winston laughed to hide his dismay. "I am sorry, sir. It was scarcely fair to my partner. You would, however, have beaten us, any way."

Barrington gravely gathered up the cards. "We will," he said, "have some music. I do not play poker."

Then, for the first time, Winston lost his head in his anger. "Nor do I, sir."

Barrington only looked at him, but the farmer felt as though somebody had struck him in the face, and,

as soon as he conveniently could, bade Miss Barrington good-night.

"But we expected you would stay here a day or two. Your place is not ready," she said.

Winston smiled at her. "I think I am wise. I must feel my way."

Miss Barrington was won, and, making no further protest, signed to Dane. "You will take Mr. Courthorne home with you," she said. "I would have kept him here, but he is evidently anxious to talk over affairs with some one more of his age than my brother is."

Dane appeared quite willing, and, an hour later, Winston sat, cigar in hand, in a room of his outlying farm. It was furnished simply, but there were signs of taste, and the farmer who occupied it had already formed a good opinion of the man whose knowledge of his own profession astonished him.

"So you are actually going to sell wheat in face of the Colonel's views?" he said.

"Of course!" said Winston simply. "I don't like unpleasantness, but I can allow no man to dictate my affairs to me."

Dane grinned. "Well," he said, "the Colonel can be nasty, and he has no great reason for being fond of you already."

"No?" said Winston. "Now, of course, my accession will make a difference at Silverdale, but I would consider it a friendly act if you will let me know the views of the colony."

Dane looked thoughtful. "The trouble is that your taking up the land leaves less for Maud Barrington than there would have been. Barrington, who is fond of the girl, was trustee for the property, and after your

—estrangement from your father—everybody expected she would get it all."

"So I have deprived Miss Barrington of part of her income?"

"Of course," said Dane. "Didn't you know?"

Winston found it difficult to answer. "I never quite realized it before. Are there more accounts against me?"

"That," said Dane slowly, "is rather a facer. We are all more or less friends of the dominant family, you see."

Winston laid down his cigar and stood up. "Now," he said, "I generally talk straight, and you have held out a hand to me. Can you believe in the apparent improbability of such a man as I am in the opinion of the folks at Silverdale getting tired of a wasted life and trying to walk straight again? I want your answer, yes or no, before I head across the prairie for my own place."

"Sit down," said Dane with a little smile. "Do you think I would have brought you here if I hadn't believed it? And, if I have my way, the first man who flings a stone will be sorry for it. Still, I don't think any of them will—or could afford it. If we had all been saints, some of us would never have come out from the old country."

He stopped and poured out two glasses of wine. "It's a long while since I've talked so much," he said. "Here's to our better acquaintance, Courthorne."

After that they talked wheat-growing and horses, and when his guest retired Dane still sat smoking thoughtfully beside the stove. "We want a man with nerve and brains," he said. "I fancy the one who has been sent us will make a difference at Silverdale."

It was about the same time when Colonel Barrington stood talking with his niece and sister in Silverdale Grange. "And the man threw that trick away, when it was absolutely clear who had the ace—and wished me to believe that he forgot!" he said.

His face was flushed with indignation, but Miss Barrington smiled at her niece. "What is your opinion, Maud?"

The girl moved one white shoulder with a little gesture of disdain. "Can you ask—after that! Besides, he twice willfully perverted facts while he talked to me, though it was not in the least necessary."

Miss Barrington looked thoughtful. "And yet, because I was watching him, I do not think he plays cards well."

"But he was a professional gambler," said the girl.

The elder lady shook her head. "So we—heard," she said. "My dear, give him a little time. I have seen many men and women—and can't help a fancy that there is good in him."

"Can the leopard change his spots?" asked Colonel Barrington, with a grim smile.

The little white-haired lady glanced at him as she said quietly, "When the wicked man——"

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CHAPTER IX

COURTHORNE DISAPPEARS

SUPPER was cooking when Lance Courthorne sat beside the glowing stove in the comfortless general room of a little wooden hotel in a desolate settlement of Montana. He had a good many acquaintances in the straggling town, where he now and then ran a faro game, though it was some months since he had last been there, and he had ridden a long way to reach it that day. He was feeling comfortably tired after the exposure to the bitter frost, and blinked drowsily at the young rancher who sat opposite him across the stove. The latter, who had come out some years earlier from the old country, was then reading a somewhat ancient English newspaper.

"What has been going on here lately?" asked Courthorne.

The other man laughed. "Does anything ever happen in this place? One would be almost thankful if a cyclone or waterspout came along, if it were only to give the boys something to talk about. Still, one of the girls here is going to get married. I'm not sure old man Clouston finds it helps his trade quite as much as he fancied it would when he fired his Chinamen and brought good-looking waitresses in. This is the third of them who has married one of the boys and left him."

"What could he expect!" and Courthorne yawned. "Who's the man, and have I seen the girl?"

"I don't think you have. So far as I remember, she

came since you were here last, and that must be quite a while ago. Nobody seems to know where Clouston got her from, and she's by no means communicative about her antecedents; but she's pretty enough for any man, and Potter is greatly stuck on her. He sold out a week or two ago—got quite a pile for the ranch, and I understand he's going back to the old country. Any way, the girl has a catch. Potter's a straight man, and most of us like him."

He turned over his paper with a little laugh. "It doesn't interest you? Well, if you had lived out at Willow six years as I have you'd be glad of anything to talk about, if it was only the affairs of one of Clouston's waitresses."

Courthorne yawned again openly and took from his pocket a letter that he had received the day before at another little town to which, in accordance with directions given, it had been forwarded him. It was from one of his whisky-running comrades and had somewhat puzzled him.

"There's about one hundred dollars due you, and we're willing to pay up," it ran. "Still, now we hear you're going back east to the Silverdale settlement it's quite likely you won't want them as much as the rest of us do. It's supposed to be quite a big farm you have come into."

Courthorne was a little troubled, as well as perplexed. He had certainly not gone to Silverdale and had no notion of doing so, though he had distant relatives there, while, so far as he knew, nobody had left him a farm of any kind. He had promised the whisky runners a guide on the night of Trooper Shannon's death, and as it was dark when, muffled in Winston's furs, he met the men—who were, as it happened, for the most part

new adherents, it seemed probable that they had not recognized him or had any reason to believe it was not Winston himself who was responsible for the trooper's death. It was not a very unusual thing for one of the smaller farmers to take a part in a smuggling venture now and then. Still, the letter left him with an unpleasant uncertainty.

By and by his companion looked up from his paper again.

"You came from my part of the old country, I think?" he said. "I see a man of your name has died there lately, and he seems to have left a good deal of property. Here's a list of the bequests."

He stopped a moment, and with another glance at it handed Courthorne the paper. "I notice your own name among them, and it's not a common one."

Courthorne stretched out his hand for the paper, and his face became intent as he read: "It is with regret many of our readers will hear of the death of Mr. Geoffrey Courthorne, well known in this vicinity as a politician with Imperialistic views and a benefactor of charitable schemes. Among the bequests are . . . and one of the farms in the Silverdale colony he established in Western Canada to Lance Courthorne."

He laid down the paper and sat rigidly still for a minute or two, while his companion glanced at him curiously.

"Then," said the latter, "it's you!"

"It is," said Courthorne dryly. "I'm much obliged to you for showing me the thing, but I'd be still more obliged if you wouldn't worry me with any questions just now."

His companion made a little gesture of comprehension as he moved away, and Courthorne leaned back in his

chair with his eyes half-closed. He could now understand his whisky-smuggling comrade's letter, for it was evident that Winston was going to Silverdale. Indeed, Courthorne could not see what other course was open to the rancher, if he wished to preserve his safety. Still, Courthorne was aware that farming, as carried on at Silverdale, was singularly unprofitable, and he had a somewhat curious confidence in the honesty of the man he had deceived. Winston, he decided, no doubt believed that he was drowned the night Trooper Shannon died, and had been traced as Courthorne by some Winnipeg lawyer acting for the executors.

Then Clouston came in to announce that supper was ready, and Courthorne took his place among the rest. The men were store-keepers of the settlement, though there were among them frost-bronzed ranchers and cattle-boys who had come in for provisions or their mail, and some of them commenced rallying one of their comrades who sat near the head of the table on his approaching wedding. The latter bore it good-humoredly, and made a sign of recognition when Courthorne glanced at him. He was a big man, with pleasant blue eyes and a genial, weather-darkened face, though he was known as a daring rider and successful breaker of vicious horses.

Courthorne sat at the bottom of the table, at some distance from him, while by and by the man at his side laughed when a girl with a tray stopped behind them. She was a very pretty girl with big black eyes, in which, however, there lurked a somewhat curious gravity.

"Fresh pork or steak? Fried potatoes," she said.

Courthorne, who could not see her as he was sitting, started involuntarily. The voice was, at least, very like one he had often listened to, and the resemblance brought

him a little shock of disgust as well as uneasiness. Gambler and outcast as he was, there was a certain fastidiousness in him, and it did not seem fitting that a girl with a voice like the one he remembered should have to ask whether one would take pork or steak in a little fourth-rate hotel.

"Take them right along, Ailly," said the man next to him. "Why don't you begin at the top where Potter's waiting?"

Then Courthorne looked around and for a moment set his lips tight, while the girl would have dropped the tray had he not stretched out a hand and seized it. A dark flush swept into her face and then as suddenly faded out of it, leaving her very pale. She stood gazing at him, and the fingers of one hand quivered on the tray, which he still held. He was, as it happened, the first to recover himself, and there was a little sardonic gleam in his eyes as he lifted down one of the plates.

"Well," he said, "I guess Potter will have to wait. I'll take steak."

The others had their backs to the girl, and by the time one or two of them turned round she was quietly helping Courthorne's companion; but it was a moment or two before Courthorne commenced to eat, for the waitress was certainly Ailly Blake. It was as certain that she had recognized him, which was, however, by no means astonishing, and this promised another complication, for he was commencing to realize that since Winston had gone to Silverdale it would be convenient that Courthorne as such should cease to exist. He fancied that should any of the men he was acquainted with happen to come across Winston at Silverdale—which was, however, most unlikely—they might be deceived by the resemblance between himself and the far-

mer; but it was hardly to be expected that Ailly Blake would fail to be sure of him in any circumstances and anywhere. He accordingly decided that he must have an interview with her as soon as possible, and, since he had been in many tight places before, in the meanwhile went on tranquilly with his supper.

The meal was over, and the men clustered around the stove when he gathered up one or two of the plates and laid them ready as the girl moved along the table. She glanced at him for a moment, with startled eyes. A spot of crimson showed in her cheek.

"I want a word with you," he said.

Ailly Blake flashed a swift glance round the room, and Courthorne noticed with a little smile that it was one man in particular her gaze rested on; but neither Potter nor any of the others seemed to be observing them at that moment.

"Then open the second door down the corridor in about twenty minutes," she said.

She moved away and left him to join the others about the stove, until the time she mentioned had elapsed, when he sauntered out of the room and opened the door she had indicated. It led into a little room apparently used as a household store. Here Ailly Blake was standing, while a litter of forks, spoons, and nickeled knives showed what her occupation had been. Courthorne sat down on a table and loked at her with a little smile, though she stood intent, and quivering a little.

"Well," she said, almost harshly, "what is it you want?"

Courthorne laughed. "Need you ask? Is it astonishing that I was anxious to see you? I don't think it's necessary to point out that you are quite as good to look at as ever."

The girl's lips trembled a little, and it was evident that she put a constraint upon herself.

"You haven't changed either," she said bitterly. "You have still the smooth tongue and the laugh in your eyes that should warn folks against it. I listened to it once, and it brought me black shame and sorrow."

"I almost fancy, Ailly, that if I wanted you to very much you would listen again."

The girl shrank from him a little and then straightened herself suddenly and faced him with a flash in her eyes.

"No," she said. "Once I would have put my hand in the fire for you; but when you left me in that dance house I knew all there was to know of you,—and I hoped you might never come in my way again. Shamed as I am, I could not fall so low as you did then."

"I don't know that I'm very proud of the part I played," and though Courthorne smiled there was a faint flush in his face. "Still, you see, I hadn't a dollar then, and what could I do? Any way, that's done with, and I was wondering if you would let me congratulate you. Potter seems to be a general favorite."

He saw the apprehension once more creep into the girl's eyes and noticed the little tremor in her voice as she said, "You have heard of it? Of course, you would. What do you mean to do?"

"Nothing," and Courthorne smiled reassuringly. "Why should I do anything? After all, I owe you a little reparation. Silence is easy and in our case, I think, advisable. Presumably you are as fond of the worthy Potter as you were of me, and there is no doubt that he is considerably more deserving of affection."

His good-humored acquiescence was in one respect almost brutal, and the girl winced under it, in spite of her evident relief.

"Lance," she said, with a curious forceful gravity, "Frank Potter is such a man as you could never be. There can't be many like him. As I said, there was a time when I would have slaved for you and starved with you cheerfully; but you threw me off,—and, now this man who is big and strong enough to forget what you brought me to has given me a chance to wipe out the past, I do not think I need be afraid of you. At first I was a little so, but it wasn't altogether for myself. I want to warn you. If you try to make mischief he will kill you."

"Ah," said Courthorne quietly. "Well, it wouldn't be very astonishing if he attempted it, and nobody would blame him; but I have, as it happens, no intention of provoking him. After all, it was my fault, and you were too good for me, Ailly."

He stopped a moment and smiled, for there was in him a certain half-whimsical cruelty. "Still, perhaps, it's a little rough on the excellent Potter, though from what you said one would think that you had told him —something."

The crimson crept into the girl's cheek. "He knows everything—except who you are. That is why I am afraid. If he found out, I think one of you would never leave this place."

Courthorne shrugged his shoulders. "I believe I owe you enough to go away to-morrow. It would be wiser. I am not, as you know, a model of discretion, and it's, perhaps, natural that, now you have given me up, you appear rather more attractive than ever. In fact, I almost feel tempted to stay to see if I'm not a match for Potter. Still, I'll go away. I suppose you haven't heard from Larry lately?"

He saw the returning fear in her face give place to

pain and bitterness as he concluded, and he made a little sign of comprehension.

"Well, perhaps, one couldn't blame him. You are going back to England with Potter after the wedding?"

His companion said she was, and Courthorne sat silent a moment or two, for the news was at once a relief to him and a cause of thoughtfulness. Ailly Blake, who would never be deceived by the resemblance between him and Winston, was a standing menace while she remained anywhere near the frontier of Canada. He had discovered that it is usually the last thing one expects or desires that happens, and it was clearly advisable for Lance Courthorne to efface himself very shortly, while the easiest way to do it was to merge his identity with that of the man who had gone in his name to Silverdale. Winston had, so far as everybody else knew, been drowned, and he must in the meanwhile, at least, not be compelled to appear again. It would simplify everything if Ailly Blake, who evidently did not know of Trooper Shannon's death, went away.

"Well," he said, "I'm glad to hear it, and I'm leaving this country, too. I'm going east to-morrow to Silverdale. I wonder if I could be permitted to send you a wedding present."

The girl turned to him with a crimson spot in her cheek, and there was a little hoarse thrill in her voice that made its impression even on him.

"Once I thought I'd have every little thing you gave me buried with me," she said. "I felt I couldn't part with them, and now I'll remember you often when I should forget,—but whatever you send I'll burn. I don't know why I'm telling you this, but I can't help it. Perhaps it's mad, foolish, but I want you to think well of me still."

She stopped and caught her breath with a little gasp, while her voice grew strained and broken as she went on.

"Lance," she said passionately, "can't you understand? It's my one chance to creep back to where I was before you came my way—and Potter's kind to me. At least, I can be straight with him, and I pray I'll never see your face, or hear your name again. Now go—go—I can't bear any more from you."

Courthorne stood still, looking at her, for almost a minute, while the wild reckless devil that was in him awoke. Clever as he was, he was apt now and then to fling prudence to the winds, and he was swayed by an almost uncontrollable impulse to stay beside the girl who, he realized, though she recognized his worthlessness, loved him still. That he did not love her, and, perhaps, never had done so, did not count with him. It was in his nature to find pleasure in snatching her from a better man. Then some faint sense of the wantonness and cruelty of it came upon him, and by a tense effort he made her a little inclination that was not ironical.

"Well," he said, "if they are worth anything my good wishes go with you. At least, they can't hurt you."

He held his hand out, but Ailly Blake shrank away from him and pointed to the door.

"Go," she said hoarsely. "Go now."

Courthorne made a little gesture that might have meant anything, and then he swung round abruptly without another look at her. When the door closed behind him he went down the corridor with a little wry smile in his eyes.

"After all, it's the gambler first," he said. "A little rough on the straight man—as usual."

Then he sat down beside the stove in the bare general room and thoughtfully smoked a cigar. Ailly was go-

ing to England, Winston, to save his neck, had gone as Courthorne to Silverdale, and in another day or two the latter would have disappeared. He could not claim his new possessions without forcing facts better left unmentined upon everybody's attention, since Winston would doubtless object to jeopardize himself to please him, and the land at Silverdale could not in any case be sold without the consent of Colonel Barrington. Winston was also an excellent farmer and a man he had confidence in, one who could be depended on to subsidize the real owner, which would suit the gambler a good deal better than farming. When he had come to this decision he threw his cigar end away and strolled towards the bar.

"Boys," he said to the loungers, "I want you to have a drink with me. Somebody has left me land and property in the very select colony of Silverdale on the Canadian prairie, and I'm going back there to take possession first thing to-morrow."

Most of them joined him, and the second time his glass was filled he lifted it and glanced at Potter.

"Long life to you and the prettiest girl on either side of the frontier!" he said.

They drank the toast with acclamation, and Courthorne, who strolled away, retired early and started for the railroad before daylight next morning. He laughed softly as he glanced back a moment at the lights of the settlement.

"There are a good many places on this side of the frontier that will suit me better than Silverdale," he said. "In fact, it's probable that most of his friends have seen the last of Lance Courthorne."

CHAPTER X

AN ARMISTICE

THE dismal afternoon was drawing in when Winston, driving home from the railroad, came into sight of a lonely farm. It lifted itself out of the prairie, a blur of huddled buildings on the crest of a long rise, but at first sight Winston scarcely noticed it. He was gazing abstractedly down the sinuous smear of trail which unrolled itself like an endless ribbon across the great white desolation, and his brain was busy. Four months had passed since he came to Silverdale, and they had left their mark on him.

At first there had been the constant fear of detection, and when that had lessened and he was accepted as Lance Courthorne, the latter's unfortunate record had met him at every turn. It accounted for the suspicions of Colonel Barrington, the reserve of his niece, and the aloofness of some of his neighbors, while there had been times when Winston found Silverdale almost unendurable. He was, however, an obstinate man, and there was on the opposite side the gracious kindliness of the little gray-haired lady, who had from the beginning been his champion, and the friendship of Dane, and one or two of the older men. Winston had also proved his right to be listened to, and treated, outwardly at least, with due civility, while something in his resolute quietness rendered an impertinence impossible. He knew by this time that he could hold his own at Silverdale, and based

his conduct on the fact, but that was only one aspect of the question, and he speculated as to the consummation.

It was, however, evident that in the meanwhile he must continue to pose as Courthorne, and he felt, rightly or wrongly, that the possession of his estate was, after all, a small reparation for the injury the outlaw had done him, but the affair was complicated by the fact that, in taking Courthorne's inheritance, he had deprived Maud Barrington of part of hers. The girl's coldness stung him, but her unquestionable beauty and strength of character had not been without their effect, and the man winced as he remembered that she had no pity for anything false or mean. He had decided only upon two things, first that he would vindicate himself in her eyes, and, since nobody else could apparently do it, pull the property that should have been hers out of the ruin it had been drifting into under her uncle's guardianship. When this had been done, and the killing of Trooper Shannon forgotten, it would be time for him to slip back into the obscurity he came from.

Then the fact that the homestead was growing nearer forced itself upon his perceptions, and he glanced doubtfully across the prairie as he approached the forking of the trail. A gray dimness was creeping across the wilderness and the smoky sky seemed to hang lower above the dully gleaming snow, while the moaning wind flung little clouds of icy dust about him. It was evident that the snow was not far away, and it was still two leagues to Silverdale, but Winston, who had been to Winnipeg, had business with the farmer, and had faced a prairie storm before. Accordingly he swung the team into the forking trail and shook the reins. There was, he knew, little time to lose, and in another

five minutes he stood, still wearing his white-sprinkled furs, in a room of the birch-log building.

"Here are your accounts, Macdonald, and while we've pulled up our losses, I can't help thinking we have just got out in time," he said. "The market is but little stiffer yet, but there is less selling, and before a few months are over we're going to see a sharp recovery."

The farmer glanced at the documents, and smiled with contentment as he took the check. "I'm glad I listened to you," he said. "It's unfortunate for him and his niece that Barrington wouldn't—at least, not until he had lost the opportunity."

"I don't understand," said Winston.

"No," said the farmer, "you've been away. Well, you know it takes a long while to get an idea into the Colonel's head, but once it's in, it's even harder to get it out again. Now Barrington looked down on wheat jobbing, but money's tight at Silverdale, and when he saw what you were making, he commenced to think. Accordingly, he's going to sell, and, as he seems convinced that wheat will not go up again, let half the acreage lie fallow this season. The worst of it is, the others will follow him, and he controls Maud Barrington's property as well as his own."

Winston's face was grave. "I heard in Winnipeg that most of the smaller men, who had lost courage, were doing the same thing. That means a very small crop of western hard, and millers paying our own prices. Somebody must stop the Colonel."

"Well," said Macdonald dryly, "I wouldn't like to be the man, and after all, it's only your opinion. As you have seen, the small men here and in Minnesota are afraid to plow."

Winston laughed softly. "The man who makes the dollars is the one who sees farther than the crowd. Any way, I found the views of one or two men who make big deals were much the same as mine, and I'll speak to Miss Barrington."

"Then, if you wait a little, you will have an opportunity. She is here, you see."

Winston looked disconcerted. "She should not have been. Why didn't you send her home? There'll be snow before she reaches Silverdale."

Macdonald laughed. "I hadn't noticed the weather, and, though my wife wished her to stay, there is no use in attempting to persuade Miss Barrington to do anything when she does not want to. In some respects she is very like the Colonel."

The farmer led the way into another room, and Winston flushed a little when the girl returned his greeting in a fashion which he fancied the presence of Mrs. Macdonald alone rendered distantly cordial. Still, a glance through the windows showed him that delay was inadvisable.

"I think you had better stay here all night, Miss Barrington," he said. "There is snow coming."

"I am sorry our views do not coincide," said the girl. "I have several things to attend to at the Grange."

"Then Macdonald will keep your team, and I will drive you home," said Winston. "Mine are the best horses at Silverdale, and I fancy we will need all their strength."

Miss Barrington looked up sharply. There had been a little ring in Winston's voice, but there was also a solicitude in his face which almost astonished her, and when Macdonald urged her to comply she rose leisurely.

"I will be ready in ten minutes," she said.

Winston waited at least twenty, very impatiently, but when at last the girl appeared, handed her with quiet deference into the sleigh, and then took his place, as far as the dimensions of the vehicle permitted, apart from her. Once he fancied she noticed it with faint amusement, but the horses knew what was coming, and it was only when he pulled them up to a trot again on the slope of a rise that he found speech convenient.

"I am glad we are alone, though I feel a little diffidence in asking a favor of you because unfortunately when I venture to recommend anything you usually set yourself against it," he said. "This is, in the language of this country, tolerably straight."

Maud Barrington laughed. "I could find no fault with it on the score of ambiguity."

"Well," said Winston, "I believe your uncle is going to sell wheat for you, and let a good deal of your land go out of cultivation. Now, as you perhaps do not know, the laws which govern the markets are very simple and almost immutable, but the trouble is that a good many people do not understand their application."

"You apparently consider yourself an exception," said the girl.

Winston nodded. "I do just now. Still, I do not wish to talk about myself. You see, the people back there in Europe must be fed, and the latest news from wheat-growing countries does not promise more than an average crop, while half the faint-hearted farmers here are not going to sow much this year. Therefore when the demand comes for Western wheat there will be little to sell."

"But how is it that you alone see this? Isn't it a trifle egotistical?"

Winston laughed. "Can't we leave my virtues, or

the reverse, out of the question? I feel that I am right, and want you to dissuade your uncle. It would be even better if, when I return to Winnipeg, you would empower me to buy wheat for you."

Maud Barrington looked at him curiously. "I am a little perplexed as to why you should wish me to."

"No doubt," said Winston. "Still, is there any reason why I should be debarred the usual privilege of taking an interest in my neighbor's affairs?"

"No," said the girl slowly. "But can you not see that it is out of the question that I should intrust you with this commission?"

Winston's hands closed on the reins, and his face grew a trifle grim as he said, "From the point of view you evidently take, I presume it is."

A flush of crimson suffused the girl's cheeks. "I never meant that, and I can scarcely forgive you for fancying I did. Of course I could trust you with—you have made me use the word—the dollars, but you must realize that I could not do anything in public opposition to my uncle's opinion."

Winston was sensible of a great relief, but it did not appear advisable to show it. "There are so many things you apparently find it difficult to forgive me—and we will let this one pass," he said. "Still, I cannot help thinking that Colonel Barrington will have a good deal to answer for."

Maud Barrington made no answer, but she was sensible of a respect which appeared quite unwarranted for the dryly-spoken man, who, though she guessed her words stung him now and then, bore them without wincing. While she sat silent, shivering under her furs, darkness crept down. The smoky cloud dropped lower, the horizon closed in as the gray obscurity rolled up to

meet them across a rapidly-narrowing strip of snow. Then she could scarcely see the horses, and the muffled drumming of their hoofs was lost in a doleful wail of wind. It also seemed to her that the cold, which was already almost insupportable, suddenly increased, as it not infrequently does in that country before the snow. Then a white powder was whirled into her face, filling her eyes and searing the skin, while the horses were plunging at a gallop through a filmy haze, and Winston, whitened all over, leaned forward with lowered head hurling hoarse encouragement at them. His voice reached her fitfully through the roar of wind, until sight and hearing were lost alike as the white haze closed about them, and it was not until the wild gust had passed she heard him again. He was apparently shouting, "Come nearer."

Maud Barrington was not sure whether she obeyed him or he seized and drew her towards him. She, however, felt the furs piled high about her neck and that there was an arm round her shoulder, and for a moment was sensible of an almost overwhelming revulsion from the contact. She was proud and very dainty, and fancied she knew what this man had been, while now she was drawn in to his side, and felt her chilled blood respond to the warmth of his body. Indeed she grew suddenly hot to the neck, and felt that henceforward she could never forgive him or herself, but the mood passed almost as swiftly, for again the awful blast shrieked about them and she only remembered her companion's humanity, as the differences of sex and character vanished under that destroying cold. They were no longer man and woman, but only beings of flesh and blood, clinging desperately to the life that was in them, for the first rush of the Western snowstorm has more than a physical

effect, and man exposed to its fury loses all but his animal instincts in the primitive struggle with the elements.

Then, while the snow folded them closely in its white embrace during a lull, the girl recovered herself, and her strained voice was faintly audible.

"This is my fault. Why don't you tell me so?" she said.

A hoarse laugh seemed to issue from the whitened object beside her, and she was drawn closer to it again. "We needn't go into that just now. You have one thing to do, and that is to keep warm."

One of the horses stumbled, the grasp that was around her became relaxed and she heard the swish of the whip followed by hoarse expletives, and did not resent it. The man, it seemed, was fighting for her life as well as his own, and even brutal virility was necessary. After that, there was a space of oblivion while the storm raged about them, until, when the wind fell a trifle, it became evident that the horses had left the trail.

"You are off the track, and will never make the Grange unless you find it," she said.

Winston seemed to nod. "We are not going there," he said, and if he added anything, it was lost in the scream of a returning gust.

Again Maud Barrington's reason reasserted itself, and remembering the man's history she became sensible of a curious dismay, but it also passed and left her with the vague realization that he and she were actuated alike only by the desire to escape extinction. Presently she became sensible that the sleigh had stopped beside a formless mound of white and the man was shaking her.

"Hold those furs about you while I lift you down," he said.

She did his bidding, and did not shrink when she felt his arms about her, while next moment she was standing knee-deep in the snow and the man shouting something she did not catch. Team and sleigh seemed to vanish, and she saw her companion dimly for a moment before he was lost in the sliding whiteness, too. Then a horrible fear came upon her.

It seemed a very long while before he reappeared, and thrust her in through what seemed to be a door. Then there was another waiting before the light of a lamp blinked out, and she saw that she was standing in a little log-walled room with bare floor and a few trusses of straw in a corner. There was also a rusty stove, and a very small pile of billets beside it. Winston, who had closed the door, stood looking at them with a curious expression.

"Where is the team?" she gasped.

"Heading for a birch bluff or Silverdale, though I scarcely think they will get there," said the man. "I have never stopped here, and it wasn't astonishing they fancied the place a pile of snow. While I was getting the furs out, they slipped from me."

Miss Barrington now knew where they were. The shanty was used by the remoter settlers as a half-way house where they slept occasionally on their long journey to the railroad, and as there was a birch bluff not far away, it was the rule that whoever occupied it should replace the fuel he had consumed. The last man had, however, not been liberal.

"But what are we to do?" she asked, with a little gasp of dismay.

"Stay here until the morning," said Winston quietly. "Unfortunately, I can't even spare you my company. The stable has fallen in, and it would be death to stand

outside, you see. In the meanwhile, pull out some of the straw and put it in the stove."

"Can you not do that?" asked Miss Barrington, feeling that she must commence at once, if she was to keep this man at a befitting distance.

Winston laughed. "Oh, yes, but you will freeze if you stand still, and these billets require splitting. Still, if you have special objections to doing what I ask you, you can walk up and down rapidly."

The girl glanced at him a moment and then lowered her eyes. "Of course I was wrong. Do you wish to hear that I am sorry?"

Winston, answering nothing, swung an ax round his head, and the girl kneeling beside the stove noticed the sinewy suppleness of his frame and the precision with which the heavy blade cleft the billets. The ax, she knew, is by no means an easy tool to handle. At last the red flame crackled, and, though she had not intended the question to be malicious, there was a faint trace of irony in her voice as she asked, "Is there any other thing you wish me to do?"

Winston flung two bundles of straw down beside the stove, and stood looking at her gravely. "Yes," he said. "I want you to sit down and let me wrap this sleigh robe about you."

The girl submitted, and did not shrink visibly from his touch, when he drew the fur robe about her shoulders and packed the end of it round her feet. Still, there was a faint warmth in her face, and she was grateful for his unconcernedness.

"Fate or fortune has placed me in charge of you until to-morrow, and if the position is distasteful to you, it is not my fault," he said. "Still, I feel the responsi-

bility, and it would be a little less difficult if you would accept the fact tacitly."

Maud Barrington would not have shivered if she could have avoided it, but the cold was too great for her, and she did not know whether she was vexed or pleased at the gleam of compassion in the man's gray eyes. It was more eloquent than anything of the kind she had ever seen, but it had gone, and he was only quietly deferent, when she glanced at him again.

"I will endeavor to be good," she said, and then flushed with annoyance at the adjective. Half-dazed by the cold as she was, she could not think of a more suitable one. Winston, however, retained his gravity.

"Now, Macdonald gave you no supper, and he has dinner at noon," he said. "I brought some eatables along, and you must make the best meal you can."

He opened a packet, and laid it with a little silver flask upon her knee.

"I cannot eat all this—and it is raw spirit," said Maud Barrington.

Winston laughed. "Are you not forgetting your promise? Still, we will melt a little snow into the cup."

An icy gust swept in when he opened the door, and it was only by a strenuous effort he closed it again, while when he came back panting with the top of the flask a little color crept into Maud Barrington's face. "I am sorry," she said. "That at least is your due."

"I really don't want my due," said Winston, with a deprecatory gesture, as he laid the silver cup upon the stove. "Can't we forget we are not exactly friends, just for to-night? If so, you will drink this and commence at once on the provisions—to please me."

Maud Barrington was glad of the reviving draught,

for she was very cold, but presently she held out the packet.

"One really cannot eat many crackers at once, will you help me?"

Winston laughed as he took one of the biscuits. "If I had expected any one would share my meal, I would have provided a better one. Still, I have been glad to feast upon more unappetizing things occasionally."

"When were you unfortunate?" said the girl.

Winston smiled somewhat dryly. "I was unfortunate for six years on end."

He was aware of the blunder when he had spoken, but Maud Barrington appeared to be looking at the flask thoughtfully.

"The design is very pretty," she said. "You got it in England?"

The man knew that it was the name F. Winston his companion's eyes rested on, but his face was expressionless. "Yes," he said. "It is one of the things they make for presentation in the old country."

Maud Barrington noticed the absence of any attempt at explanation, and having considerable pride of her own, was sensible of a faint approval. "You are making slow progress," she said, with a slight but perceptible difference in her tone. "Now, you can have eaten nothing since breakfast."

Winston said nothing, but by and by poured a little of the spirit into a rusty can, and the girl, who understood why he did so, felt that it covered several of his offenses. "Now," she said graciously, "you may smoke if you wish to."

Winston pointed to the few billets left and shook his head. "I'm afraid I must get more wood."

The roar of wind almost drowned his voice, and the

birch logs seemed to tremble under the impact of the blast, while Maud Barrington shivered as she asked, "Is it safe?"

"It is necessary," said Winston, with the little laugh she had already found reassuring.

He had gone out in another minute, and the girl felt curiously lonely as she remembered stories of men who had left their homesteads during a blizzard to see to the safety of the horses in a neighboring stable, and were found afterwards as still as the snow that covered them. Maud Barrington was not unduly timorous, but the roar of that awful icy gale would have stricken dismay into the hearts of most men, and she found herself glancing with feverish impatience at a diminutive gold watch and wondering whether the cold had retarded its progress. Ten minutes passed very slowly, lengthened to twenty more slowly still, and then it flashed upon her that there was at least something she could do, and scraping up a little of the snow that sifted in, she melted it in the can. Then she set the flask top upon the stove, and once more listened for the man's footsteps very eagerly.

She did not hear them, but at last the door swung open, and carrying a load of birch branches Winston staggered in. He dropped them, strove to close the door and failed, then leaned against it, gasping, with a livid face, for there are few men who can withstand the cold of a snow-laden gale at forty degrees below.

How Maud Barrington closed the door she did not know, but it was with a little imperious gesture she turned to the man.

"Shake those furs at once," she said, and drawing him towards the stove held up the steaming cup. "Now sit there, and drink it."

Winston stooped and reached out for the can, but the girl swept it off the stove. "Oh, I know the silver was for me," she said. "Still, is this a time for trifles such as that?"

Worn out by a very grim struggle, Winston did as he was bidden, and looked up with a twinkle in his eyes, when with the faintest trace of color in her cheeks the girl sat down close to him and drew part of the fur robe about him.

"I really believe you were a little pleased to see me come back just now," he said.

"Was that quite necessary?" asked Maud Barrington. "Still, I was."

Winston made a little deprecatory gesture. "Of course," he said. "Now, we can resume our former footing to-morrow, but in the meanwhile I would like to know why you are so hard upon me, Miss Barrington, because I really have not done much harm to any one at Silverdale. Your aunt,"—and he made a little respectful inclination of his head which pleased the girl—"is at least giving me a fair trial."

"It is difficult to tell you—but it was your own doing," said Maud Barrington. "At the beginning you prejudiced us when you told us you could only play cards indifferently. It was so unnecessary, and we knew a good deal about you!"

"Well," said Winston quietly, "I have only my word to offer, and I wonder if you will believe me now, but I don't think I ever won five dollars at cards in my life."

Maud Barrington watched him closely, but his tone carried conviction, and again she was glad that he attempted no explanation. "I am quite willing to take it," she said. "Still, you can understand——"

"Yes," said Winston. "It puts a strain upon your faith, but some day I may be able to make a good deal that puzzles you quite clear."

Maud Barrington glanced at the flask. "I wonder if that is connected with the explanation, but I will wait. Now, you have not lighted your cigar."

Winston understood that the topic was dismissed, and sat thoughtfully still while the girl nestled against the birch logs close beside him under the same furs, for the wind went through the building and the cold was unbearable a few feet from the stove. The birch rafters shook above their heads, and every now and then it seemed that a roaring gust would lift the roof from them. Still the stove glowed and snapped, and close in about it there was a drowsy heat, while presently the girl's eyes grew heavy. Finally, for there are few who can resist the desire for sleep in the cold of the Northwest, her head sank back, and Winston, rising very slowly, held his breath as he piled the furs about her. That done, he stooped and looked down upon her while the blood crept to his face. Maud Barrington lay very still, the long dark lashes resting on her cold tinted cheek, and the patrician serenity of her face was even more marked in her sleep. Then he turned away feeling like one who had committed a desecration, knowing that he had looked too long already upon the sleeping girl who believed he had been an outcast and yet had taken his word, for it was borne in upon him that a time would come when he would try her faith even more severely. Moving softly he paced up and down the room.

Winston afterwards wondered how many miles he walked that night, for though the loghouse was not longer than thirty feet, the cold bit deep; but at last

he heard a sigh as he glanced towards the stove, and immediately swung round again. When he next turned, Miss Barrington stood upright, a little flushed in face but otherwise very calm, and the man stood still, shivering in spite of his efforts and blue with cold. The wind had fallen, but the sting of the frost that followed it made itself felt beside the stove.

"You had only your deerskin jacket—and you let me sleep under all the furs," she said.

Winston shook his head, and hoped he did not look as guilty as he felt, when he remembered that it must have been evident to his companion that the furs did not get into the position they had occupied themselves.

"I only fancied you were a trifle drowsy and not inclined to talk," he said, with an absence of concern, for which Miss Barrington, who did not believe him, felt grateful. "You see,"—and the inspiration was a trifle too evident—"I was too sleepy to notice anything myself. Still, I am glad you are awake now, because I must make my way to the Grange."

"But the snow will be ever so deep, and I could not come," said Maud Barrington.

Winston shook his head. "I'm afraid you must stay here, but I will be back with Colonel Barrington in a few hours at latest."

The girl deemed it advisable to hide her consternation. "But you might not find the trail," she said. "The ravine would lead you to Graham's homestead."

"Still," said Winston slowly, "I am going to the Grange."

Then Maud Barrington remembered, and glanced aside from him. It was evident this man thought of everything, and she made no answer when Winston,

who thrust more billets into the stove, turned to her with a little smile.

"I think we need remember nothing when we meet again, beyond the fact that you will give me a chance of showing that the Lance Courthorne whose fame you know has ceased to exist."

Then he went out, and the girl stood with flushed cheeks looking down at the furs he had left behind him.

CHAPTER XI

MAUD BARRINGTON'S PROMISE

DAYLIGHT had not broken across the prairie when, floundering through a foot of dusty snow, Winston reached the Grange. He was aching from fatigue and cold, and the deerskin jacket stood out from his numbed body stiff with frost, when, leaning heavily on a table, he awaited Colonel Barrington. The latter, on entering, stared at him, and then flung open a cupboard and poured out a glass of wine.

"Drink that before you talk. You look half-dead," he said.

Winston shook his head. "Perhaps you had better hear me first."

Barrington thrust the glass upon him. "I could make nothing of what you told me while you speak like that. Drink it, and then sit still until you get used to the different temperature."

Winston drained the glass, and sank limply into a chair. As yet his face was colorless, though his chilled flesh tingled horribly as the blood once more crept into the surface tissues. Then he fixed his eyes upon his host as he told his story. Barrington stood very straight watching his visitor, but his face was drawn, for the resolution which supported him through the day was less noticeable in the early morning, and it was evident now at least that he was an old man carrying a heavy load of anxiety. Still, as the story proceeded, a

little blood crept into his cheeks, while Winston guessed that he found it difficult to retain his grim immobility.

"I am to understand that an attempt to reach the Grange through the snow would have been perilous?" he said.

"Yes," said Winston quietly.

The older man stood very still regarding him intently, until he said, "I don't mind admitting that it was distinctly regrettable!"

Winston stopped him with a gesture. "It was at least unavoidable, sir. The team would not face the snow, and no one could have reached the Grange alive."

"No doubt you did your best—and, as a connection of the family, I am glad it was you. Still—and there are cases in which it is desirable to speak plainly—the affair, which you will, of course, dismiss from your recollection, is to be considered as closed now."

Winston smiled, and a trace of irony he could not quite repress was just discernible in his voice. "I scarcely think that was necessary, sir. It is, of course, sufficient for me to have rendered a small service to the distinguished family which has given me an opportunity of proving my right to recognition, and neither you, nor Miss Barrington, need have any apprehension that I will presume upon it!"

Barrington wheeled round. "You have the Courthorne temper, at least, and perhaps I deserved this display of it. You acted with commendable discretion in coming straight to me—and the astonishment I got drove the other aspect of the question out of my head. If it hadn't been for you, my niece would have frozen."

"I'm afraid I spoke unguardedly, sir, but I am very tired. Still, if you will wait a few minutes, I will get the horses out without troubling the hired man."

Barrington made a little gesture of comprehension, and then shook his head. "You are fit for nothing further, and need rest and sleep."

"You will want somebody, sir," said Winston. "The snow is very loose and deep."

He went out, and Barrington, who looked after him with a curious expression in his face, nodded twice as if in approval. Twenty minutes later, he took his place in the sleigh that slid away from the Grange, which lay a league behind it when the sunrise flamed across the prairie. The wind had gone, and there was only a pitiless brightness and a devastating cold, while the snow lay blown in wisps, dried dusty and fine as flour by the frost. It had no cohesion, the runners sank in it, and Winston was almost waist-deep when he dragged the floundering team through the drifts. A day had passed since he had eaten anything worth mention, but he held on with an endurance which his companion, who was incapable of rendering him assistance, wondered at. There were belts of deep snow the almost buried sleigh must be dragged through, and tracts from which the wind had swept the dusty covering, leaving bare the grasses the runners would not slide over, where the team came to a standstill, and could scarcely be urged to continue the struggle.

At last, however, the loghouse rose, a lonely mound of whiteness, out of the prairie, and Winston drew in a deep breath of contentment when a dusky figure appeared for a moment in the doorway. His weariness seemed to fall from him, and once more his companion wondered at the tirelessness of the man, as floundering on foot beside them he urged the team through the powdery drifts beneath the big birch bluff. Winston did not go in, however, when they reached the house,

and when, five minutes later, Maud Barrington came out, she saw him leaning with a drawn face very wearily against the sleigh. He straightened himself suddenly at the sight of her, but she had seen sufficient, and her heart softened towards him. Whatever the man's history had been he had borne a good deal for her.

The return journey was even more arduous, and now and then Maud Barrington felt a curious throb of pity for the worn-out man, who during most of it walked beside the team; but it was accomplished at last, and she contrived to find means of thanking him alone when they reached the Grange.

Winston shook his head, and then smiled a little. "It isn't nice to make a bargain," he said. "Still, it is less pleasant now and then to feel under an obligation, though there is no reason why you should."

Maud Barrington was not altogether pleased, but she could not blind herself to facts, and it was plain that there was an obligation. "I am afraid I cannot quite believe that, but I do not see what you are leading to."

Winston's eyes twinkled. "Well," he said reflectively, "I don't want you to fancy that last night commits you to any line of conduct in regard to me. I only asked for a truce, you see."

Maud Barrington was a trifle nettled. "Yes?" she said.

"Then, I want to show you how you can discharge any trifling obligation you may fancy you may owe me, which of course would be more pleasant to you. Do not allow your uncle to sell any wheat forward for you, and persuade him to sow every acre that belongs to you this spring."

"But however would this benefit you?" asked the girl.

Winston laughed. "I have a fancy that I can straighten up things at Silverdale, if I can get my way. It would please me, and I believe they want it. Of course a desire to improve anything appears curious in me!"

Maud Barrington was relieved of the necessity of answering, for the Colonel came up just then, but, moved by some sudden impulse, she nodded as if in agreement.

It was afternoon when she awakened from a refreshing sleep, and descending to the room set apart for herself and her aunt, sat thoughtfully still a while in a chair beside the stove. Then, stretching out her hand, she took up a little case of photographs and slipped out one of them. It was a portrait of a boy and pony, but there was a significance in the fact that she knew just where to find it. The picture was a good one, and once more Maud Barrington noticed the arrogance, which did not, however, seem out of place there in the lad's face. It was also a comely face, but there was a hint of sensuality in it that marred its beauty. Then with a growing perplexity she compared it with that of the weary man who had plodded beside the team. Winston was not arrogant, but resolute, and there was no stamp of indulgence in his face. Indeed, the girl had from the beginning recognized the virility in it that was tinged with asceticism and sprang from a simple strenuous life of toil in the wind and sun.

Just then there was a rustle of fabric, and she laid down the photograph a moment too late, as her aunt came in. As it happened, the elder lady's eyes rested on the picture, and a faint flush of annoyance crept into the face of the girl. It was scarcely perceptible, but Miss Barrington saw it, and though she felt tempted, did not smile.

"I did not know you were down," she said. "Lance is still asleep. He seemed very tired."

"Yes," said the girl. "That is very probable. He left the railroad before daylight, and had driven round to several farms before he came to Macdonald's, and he was very considerate. He made me take all the furs, and, I fancy, walked up and down all night long, with nothing on but his indoor clothing, though the wind went through the building, and one could scarcely keep alive a few feet from the stove."

Again the faint flicker of color crept into the girl's cheek, and the eyes that were keen as well as gentle noticed it.

"I think you owe him a good deal," said Miss Barrington.

"Yes," said her niece, with a little laugh which appeared to imply a trace of resentment. "I believe I do, but he seemed unusually anxious to relieve me of that impression. He was also good enough to hint that nothing he might have done need prevent me being—the right word is a trifle difficult to find—but I fancy he meant unpleasant to him if I wished it."

There was a little twinkle in Miss Barrington's eyes. "Are you not a trifle hard to please, my dear? Now, if he had attempted to insist on a claim to your gratitude you would have resented it."

"Of course," said the girl reflectively. "Still, it is annoying to be debarred from offering it. There are times, aunt, when I can't help wishing that Lance Courthorne had never come to Silverdale. There are men who leave nothing just as they found it, and whom one can't ignore."

Miss Barrington shook her head. "I fancy you are wrong. He has offended, after all?"

She was pleased to see her niece's face relax into a smile that expressed unconcern. "We are all exacting now and then," said the girl. "Still, he made me promise to give him a fair trial, which was not flattering, because it suggested that I had been unnecessarily harsh, and then hinted this morning that he had no intention of holding me to it. It really was not gratifying to find he held the concession he asked for of so small account. You are, however, as easily swayed by trifles as I am, because Lance can do no wrong since he kissed your hand."

"I really think I liked him the better for it," said the little silver-haired lady. "The respect was not assumed, but wholly genuine, you see, and whether I was entitled to it or not, it was a good deal in Lance's favor that he should offer it to me. There must be some good in the man who can be moved to reverence anything, even if he is mistaken."

"No man with any sense could help adoring you," said Maud Barrington. "Still, I wonder why you believe I was wrong in wishing he had not come to Silverdale?"

Miss Barrington looked thoughtful. "I will tell you, my dear. There are few better men than my brother, but his thoughts, and the traditions he is bound by, are those of fifty years ago, while the restless life of the prairie is a thing of to-day. We have fallen too far behind it at Silverdale, and a crisis is coming that none of us are prepared for. Even Dane is scarcely fitted to help my brother to face it, and the rest are either over-fond of their pleasure or untrained boys. Brave lads they are, but none of them have been taught that it is only by mental strain, or the ceaseless toil of his body, the man without an inheritance can win himself a competence now. This is why they want a leader who has

known hardship and hunger, instead of ease, and won what he holds with his own hand in place of having it given him."

"You fancy we could find one in such a man as Lance has been?"

Miss Barrington looked grave. "I believe the prodigal was afterwards a better as well as a wiser man than the one who stayed at home, and I am not quite sure that Lance's history is so nearly like that of the son in the parable as we have believed it to be. A residence in the sty is apt to leave a stain which I have not found on him, though I have looked for it."

The eyes of the two women met, and, though nothing more was said, each realized that the other was perplexed by the same question, while the girl was astonished to find her vague suspicions shared. While they sat silent, Colonel Barrington came in.

"I am glad to see you looking so much better, Maud," he said, with a trace of embarrassment. "Courthorne is still resting. Now, I can't help feeling that we have been a trifle more distant than was needful with him. The man has really behaved very discreetly. I mean in everything."

This was a great admission, and Miss Barrington smiled. "Did it hurt you very much to tell us that?" she asked.

The Colonel laughed. "I know what you mean, and if you put me on my mettle, I'll retract. After all, it was no great credit to him, because blood will tell, and he is, of course, a Courthorne."

Almost without her intention, Maud Barrington's eyes wandered towards the photograph, and then looking up she met those of her aunt, and once more saw the thought that troubled her in them.

"The Courthorne blood is responsible for a good deal

more than discretion," said Miss Barrington, who went out quietly.

Her brother appeared a trifle perplexed. "Now, I fancied your aunt had taken him under her wing, and when I was about to suggest that, considering the connection between the families, we might ask him over to dinner occasionally, she goes away," he said.

The girl looked down a moment, for realizing that her uncle recognized the obligation he was under to the man he did not like, she remembered that she herself owed him considerably more, and he had asked for something in return. It was not altogether easy to grant, but she had tacitly pledged herself, and turning suddenly she laid a hand on Barrington's arm.

"Of course, but I want to talk of something else just now," she said. "You know I have very seldom asked you questions about my affairs, but I wish to take a little practical interest in them this year."

"Yes?" said Barrington, with a smile. "Well, I am at your service, my dear, and quite ready to account for my stewardship. You are no longer my ward, except by your own wishes."

"I am still your niece," said the girl, patting his arm. "Now, there is, of course, nobody who could manage the farming better than you do, but I would like to raise a large crop of wheat this season."

"It wouldn't pay," and the Colonel grew suddenly grave. "Very few men in the district are going to sow all their holding. Wheat is steadily going down."

"Then if nobody sows there will be very little, and shouldn't that put up the prices?"

Barrington's eyes twinkled. "Who has been teaching you commercial economy? You are too pretty to understand such things, and the argument is fallacious,

because the wheat is consumed in Europe; and even if we have not much to offer, they can get plenty from California, Chile, India, and Australia."

"Oh, yes—and Russia," said the girl. "Still, you see, the big mills in Winnipeg and Minneapolis depend upon the prairie. They couldn't very well bring wheat in from Australia."

Barrington was still smiling with his eyes, but his lips were set. "A little knowledge is dangerous, my dear, and if you could understand me better, I could show you where you were wrong. As it is, I can only tell you that I have decided to sell wheat forward and plow very little."

"But that was a policy you condemned with your usual vigor. You really know you did."

"My dear," said the Colonel, with a little impatient gesture, "one can never argue with a lady. You see —circumstances alter cases considerably."

He nodded with an air of wisdom as though that decided it, but the girl persisted. "Uncle," she said, drawing closer to him with lithe gracefulness, "I want you to let me have my own way just for once, and if I am wrong, I will never do anything you do not approve of again. After all, it is a very little thing, and you would like to please me."

"It is a trifle that is likely to cost you a good deal of money," said the Colonel dryly.

"I think I could afford it, and you could not refuse me."

"As I am only your uncle, and no longer a trustee, I could not," said Barrington. "Still, you would not act against my wishes?"

His eyes were gentle, unusually so, for he was not as a rule very patient when any one questioned his will,

but there was a reproach in them that hurt the girl. Still, because she had promised, she persisted.

"No," she said. "That is why it would be ever so much nicer if you would just think as I did."

Barrington looked at her steadily. "If you insist, I can at least hope for the best," he said, with a gravity that brought a faint color to the listener's cheek.

It was next day when Winston took his leave, and Maud Barrington stood beside him, as he put on his driving furs.

"You told me there was something you wished me to do, and, though it was difficult, it is done," she said. "My holding will be sown with wheat this spring."

Winston turned his head aside a moment, and apparently found it needful to fumble at the fastenings of the furs, while there was a curious expression in his eyes when he looked round again.

"Then," he said, with a little smile, "we are quits. That cancels any little obligation which may have existed."

He had gone in another minute, and Maud Barrington turned back into the stove-warmed room very quietly. Her lips were, however, somewhat closely set.

CHAPTER XII

SPEED THE PLOW

WINTER had fled back beyond the barrens to the lonely North at last, and though here and there a little slushy snow still lay soaking the black loam in a hollow, a warm wind swept the vast levels, when one morning Colonel Barrington rode with his niece and sister across the prairie. Spring comes suddenly in that region, and the frost-bleached sod was steaming under an effulgent sun, while in places a hardy flower peeped through. It was six hundred miles to the forests on the Rockies' eastern slope, and as far to the Athabascan pines, but it seemed to Maud Barrington that their resinous sweetness was in the glorious western wind, which awoke a musical sighing from the sea of rippling grass. It rolled away before her in billows of lustrous silver-gray, and had for sole boundary the first upward spring of the arch of cloudless blue, across which the vanguard of the feathered host pressed on, company by company, towards the Pole.

The freshness of it all stirred her blood like wine, and the brightness that flooded the prairie had crept into her eyes, for those who bear the iron winter of that lonely land realize the wonder of the reawakening, which in a little space of days dresses the waste, that has lain for long months white and silent as the dead, in living green. It also has its subtle significance that the grimmest toiler feels, and the essence of it is hope eternal

and triumphant life. The girl felt the thrill of it, and gave thanks by an answering brightness, as the murmuring grasses and peeping flowerets did, but there was behind her instinctive gladness a vague wonder and expectancy. She had read widely, and seen the life of the cities with understanding eyes, and now she was to be provided with the edifying spectacle of the gambler and outcast turned farmer.

Had she been asked a few months earlier whether the man who had, as Courthorne had done, cast away his honor and wallowed in the mire, could come forth again and purge himself from the stain, her answer would have been coldly skeptical, but now with the old familiar miracle and what it symbolized before her eyes, the thing looked less improbable. Why this should give her pleasure she did not know, or would not admit that she did, but the fact remained that it was so.

Trotting down the slope of the next rise, they came upon him, as he stood by a great breaker plow with very little sign of dissolute living upon him. In front of him, the quarter-mile furrow led on beyond the tall sighting poles on the crest of the next rise, and four splendid horses, of a kind not very usual on the prairie, were stamping the steaming clods at his side. Bronzed by frost and sun, with his brick-red neck and arch of chest revealed by the coarse blue shirt that, belted at the waist, enhanced his slenderness, the repentant prodigal was at least a passable specimen of the animal man, but it was the strength and patience in his face that struck the girl, as he turned towards her, bareheaded, with a little smile in his eyes. She also noticed the difference he presented with his ingrained hands and the stain of the soil upon him, to her uncle, who sat his horse, immaculate as usual, with gloved hand on the bridle, for

the Englishmen at Silverdale usually hired other men to do their coarser work for them.

"So you are commencing in earnest in face of my opinion?" said Barrington. "Of course, I wish you success, but that consummation appears distinctly doubtful."

Winston laughed as he pointed to a great machine which, hauled by four horses, rolled towards them, scattering the black clods in its wake. "I'm doing what I can to achieve it, sir," he said. "In fact, I'm staking somewhat heavily. That team with the gang plows and cultivators cost me more dollars than I care to remember."

"No doubt," said Barrington dryly. "Still, we have always considered oxen good enough for breaking prairie at Silverdale."

Winston nodded. "I used to do so, sir, when I could get nothing better, but after driving oxen for eight years one finds out their disadvantages."

Barrington's face grew a trifle stern. "There are times when you tax our patience, Lance," he said. "Still, there is nothing to be gained by questioning your assertion. What I fail to see, is where your reward for all this will come from, because I am still convinced that the soil will, so to speak, give you back eighty cents for every dollar you put into it. I would, however, like to look at those implements. I have never seen better ones."

He dismounted and helped his companion down, for Winston made no answer. The farmer was never sure what actuated him, but, save in an occasional fit of irony, he had not attempted by any reference to make his past fall into line with Courthorne's since he had first been accepted as the latter at Silverdale. He had

taken the dead man's inheritance for a while, but he would stoop no further, and to speak the truth, which he saw was not credited, brought him a grim amusement and also flung a sop to his pride. Presently, however, Miss Barrington turned to him, and there was a kindly gleam in her eyes as she glanced at the splendid horses and widening strip of plowing.

"You have the hope of youth, Lance, to make this venture when all looks black—and it pleases me," she said. "Sometimes I fancy that men had braver hearts than they have now, when I was young."

Winston flushed a trifle, and stretching out an arm swept his hand round the horizon. "All that looked dead a very little while ago, and now you can see the creeping greenness in the sod," he said. "The lean years cannot last forever, and, even if one is beaten again, there is a consolation in knowing that one has made a struggle. Now, I am quite aware that you are fancying a speech of this kind does not come well from me."

Maud Barrington had seen his gesture, and something in the thought that impelled it, as well as the almost statuesque pose of his thinly-clad figure, appealed to her. Courthorne as farmer, with the damp of clean effort on his forehead and the stain of the good soil that would faithfully repay it on his garments, had very little in common with the profligate and gambler. Vaguely she wondered whether he was not working out his own redemption by every wheat furrow torn from the virgin prairie, and then again the doubt crept in. Could this man have ever found pleasure in the mire?

"You will plow your holding, Lance?" asked the elder lady, who had not answered his last speech yet, but meant to later.

"Yes," said the man. "All I can. It's a big venture, and, if it fails, will cripple me, but I seem to feel, apart from any reason I can discern, that wheat is going up again, and I must go through with this plowing. Of course, it does not sound very sensible."

Miss Barrington looked at him gravely, for there was a curious and steadily-tightening bond between the two. "It depends upon what you mean by sense. Can we reason out all we feel, and is there nothing, intangible but real, behind the impulses which may be sent to us?"

"Well," said Winston, with a little smile, "that is a trifle too deep for me, and it's difficult to think of anything but the work I have to do. But you were the first at Silverdale to hold out a hand to me—and I have a feeling that your good wishes would go a long way now. Is it altogether fantastic to believe that the good-will of my first friend would help to bring me prosperity?"

The white-haired lady's eyes grew momentarily soft, and, with a gravity that did not seem out of place, she moved forward and laid her hand on a big horse's neck, and smiled when the dumb beast responded to her gentle touch.

"It is a good work," she said. "Lance, there is more than dollars, or the bread that somebody is needing, behind what you are doing, and because I loved your mother I know how her approval would have followed you. And now sow in hope, and God speed your plow!"

She turned away almost abruptly, and Winston stood still with one hand closed tightly and a little deeper tint in the bronze of his face, sensible at once of an unchanged resolution and a horrible degradation. Then he saw that the Colonel had helped Miss Barrington into the saddle and her niece was speaking.

"I have something to ask Mr. Courthorne and will overtake you," she said.

The others rode on, and the girl turned to Winston. "I made you a promise and did my best to keep it, but I find it harder than I fancied it would be," she said. "I want you to release me."

"I should like to hear your reasons," said Winston.

The girl made a faint gesture of impatience. "Of course, if you insist."

"I do," said Winston quietly.

"Then I promised you to have my holding sown this year, and I am still willing to do so, but though my uncle makes no protest, I know he feels my opposition very keenly, and it hurts me horribly. Unspoken reproaches are the worst to bear, you know, and now Dane and some of the others are following your lead, it is painful to feel that I am taking part with them against the man who has always been kind to me."

"And you would prefer to be loyal to Colonel Barrington, even if it costs you a good deal?"

"Of course!" said Maud Barrington. "Can you ask me?"

Winston saw the sparkle in her eyes and the half-contemptuous pride in the poise of the shapely head. Loyalty, it was evident, was not a figure of speech with her, but he felt that he had seen enough and turned his face aside.

"I knew it would be difficult when I asked," he said. "Still, I cannot give you back that promise. We are going to see a great change this year, and I have set my heart on making all I can for you."

"But why should you?" asked Maud Barrington, somewhat astonished that she did not feel more angry.

"Well," said Winston gravely, "I may tell you by

and by, and in the meanwhile you can set it down to vanity. This may be my last venture at Silverdale, and I want to make it a big success."

The girl glanced at him sharply, and it was because the news caused her an unreasonable concern that there was a trace of irony in her voice.

"Your last venture! Have we been unkind to you, or does it imply that, as you once insinuated, an exemplary life becomes monotonous?"

Winston laughed. "No. I should like to stay here —a very long while," he said, and the girl saw he spoke the truth, as she watched him glance wistfully at the splendid teams, great plows, and rich black soil. "In fact, strange as it may appear, it will be virtue, given the rein for once, that drives me out when I go away."

"But where are you going to?"

Winston glanced vaguely across the prairie, and the girl was puzzled by the look in his eyes. "Back to my own station," he said softly, as though to himself, and then turned with a little shrug of his shoulders. "In the meanwhile there is a good deal to do, and once more I am sorry I cannot release you."

"Then, there is an end of it. You cannot expect me to beg you to, so we will discuss the practical difficulty. I cannot under the circumstances borrow my uncle's teams, and I am told I have not sufficient men or horses to put a large crop in."

"Of course!" said Winston quietly. "Well, I have now the best teams and machines on this part of the prairies, and I am bringing Ontario men in—I will do the plowing—and, if it will make it easier for you, you can pay me for the services."

There was a little flush on the girl's face. "It is all distasteful, but as you will not give me back my word, I

will keep it to the letter. Still, it almost makes me reluctant to ask you a further favor."

"This one is promised before you ask it," said Winston quietly.

It cost Maud Barrington some trouble to make her wishes clear, and Winston's smile was not wholly one of pleasure as he listened. One of the young English lads, who was, it appeared, a distant connection of the girl's, had been losing large sums of money at a gaming table, and seeking other equally undesirable relaxations at the railroad settlement. For the sake of his mother in England, Miss Barrington desired him brought to his senses, but was afraid to appeal to the Colonel, whose measures were occasionally more Draconic than wise.

"I will do what I can," said Winston. "Still, I am not sure that a lad of the kind is worth your worrying over, and I am a trifle curious as to what induced you to entrust the mission to me?"

The girl felt embarrassed, but she saw that an answer was expected. "Since you ask, it occurred to me that you could do it better than anybody else," she said. "Please don't misunderstand me, but I fancy it is the other man who is leading him away."

Winston smiled somewhat grimly. "Your meaning is quite plain, and I am already looking forward to the encounter with my fellow-gambler. You believe that I will prove a match for him."

Maud Barrington, to her annoyance, felt the blood creep to her forehead, but she looked at the man steadily, noticing the quiet forcefulness beneath his somewhat caustic amusement.

"Yes," she said, simply; "and I shall be grateful."

In another few minutes she was galloping across the prairie, and when she rejoined her aunt and Barrington,

endeavored to draw out the latter's opinion respecting Courthorne's venture by a few discreet questions.

"Heaven knows where he was taught it, but there is no doubt that the man is an excellent farmer," he said. "It is a pity that he is also to all intents and purposes mad."

Miss Barrington glanced at her niece, and both of them smiled, for the Colonel usually took for granted the insanity of any one who questioned his opinions.

In the meanwhile Winston sat swaying on the driving-seat, mechanically guiding the horses, and noticing how the prairie sod rolled away in black waves beneath the great plow. He heard the crackle of fibers beneath the triple shares, and the swish of greasy loam along the moldboard's side, but his thoughts were far away, and when he raised his head, he looked into the dim future beyond the long furrow that cut the skyline on the rise.

It was shadowy and uncertain, but one thing was clear to him, and that was that he could not stay at Silverdale. At first, he had almost hoped he might do this, for the good land and the means of efficiently working it had been a great temptation. That was before he reckoned on Maud Barrington's attractions, but of late he had seen what these were leading him to, and all that was good in him recoiled from an attempt to win her. Once he had dared to wonder whether it could be done, for his grim life had left him self-centered and bitter, but that mood had passed, and it was with disgust he looked back upon it. Now he knew that the sooner he left Silverdale the less difficult it would be to forget her, but he was still determined to vindicate himself by the work he did, and make her affairs secure. Then, with or without a confession, he would slip back into the obscurity he came from.

While he worked the soft wind rioted about him, and the harbingers of summer passed north in battalions overhead—crane, brant-goose, and mallard, in crescents, skeins, and wedges, after the fashion of their kind. Little long-tailed gophers whisked across the whitened sod, and when the great plow rolled through the shadows of a bluff, jack rabbits, pied white and gray, scurried amidst the rustling leaves. Even the birches were fragrant in that vivifying air, and seemed to rejoice as all animate creatures did, but the man's face grew more somber as the day of toil wore on. Still, he did his work with the grim, unwavering diligence that had already carried him, dismayed but unyielding, through years of drought and harvest hail, and the stars shone down on the prairies when at last he loosed his second team.

Then, standing in the door of his lonely homestead, he glanced at the great shadowy granaries and barns, and clenched his hand as he saw what he could do if the things that had been forced upon him were rightfully his. He knew his own mettle, and that he could hold them if he would, but the pale, cold face of a woman rose up in judgment against him, and he also knew that because of the love of her, that was casting its toils about him, he must give them up.

Far back on the prairie a lonely coyote howled, and a faint wind, that was now like snow-cooled wine, brought the sighing of limitless grasses out of the silence. There was no cloud in the crystalline ether, and something in the vastness and stillness that spoke of infinity, brought a curious sense of peace to him. Impostor though he was, he would leave Silverdale better than he found it, and afterwards it would be of no great moment what became of him. Countless generations of toiling men had borne their petty sorrows before him, and gone back

to the dust they sprang from, but still, in due succession, harvest followed seed-time, and the world whirled on. Then, remembering that, in the meanwhile, he had much to do which would commence with the sun on the morrow, he went back into the house and shook the fancies from him.

CHAPTER XIII

MASTERY RECOGNIZED

THERE was, considering the latest price of wheat, a somewhat astonishing attendance in the long room of the hotel at the railroad settlement one Saturday evening. A big stove in the midst of it diffused a stuffy and almost unnecessary heat, gaudy nickeled lamps an uncertain brilliancy, and the place was filled with the drifting smoke of indifferent tobacco. Oleographs, barbaric in color and drawing, hung about the roughly-boarded walls, and any critical stranger would have found the saloon comfortless and tawdry.

It was, however, filled that night with bronzed-faced men who expected nothing better. Most of them wore jackets of soft black leather or embroidered deerskin, and the jean trousers and long boots of not a few apparently stood in need of repairing, though the sprinkling of more conventional apparel and paler faces showed that the storekeepers of the settlement had been drawn together, as well as the prairie farmers who had driven in to buy provisions or take up their mail. There was, however, but little laughter, and their voices were low, for boisterousness and assertion are not generally met with on the silent prairie. Indeed, the attitude of some of the men was mildly deprecatory, as though they felt that in assisting in what was going forward they were doing an unusual thing. Still, the eyes of all were turned towards the table where a man, who differed widely in appearance from most of them, dealt out the cards.

He wore city clothes, and a white shirt with a fine diamond in the front of it, while there was a keen intentness behind the half-ironical smile in his somewhat colorless face. The whiteness of his long nervous fingers and the quickness of his gestures would also have stamped his as a being of different order from the slowly-spoken prairie farmers, while the slenderness of the little pile of coins in front of him testified that his endeavors to tempt them to speculation on games of chance had met with no very marked success as yet. Gambling for stakes of moment is not a popular amusement in that country where the soil demands his best from every man in return for the scanty dollars it yields him, but the gamester had chosen his time well, and the men who had borne the dreary solitude of winter in outlying farms, and now only saw another adverse season opening before them, were for once in the mood to clutch at any excitement that would relieve the monotony of their toilsome lives.

A few were betting small sums with an apparent lack of interest which did not in the least deceive the dealer, and when he handed a few dollars out he laughed a little as he turned to the barkeeper.

"Set them up again. I want a drink to pass the time," he said. "I'll play you at anything you like to put a name to, boys, if this game don't suit you, but you'll have to give me the chance of making my hotel bill. In my country I've seen folks livelier at a funeral."

The glasses were handed around, but when the gambler reached out towards the silver at his side, a big, bronze-skinned rancher stopped him.

"No," he drawled. "We're not sticking you for a locomotive tank, and this comes out of my treasury. I'll call you three dollars, and take my chances on the draw."

"Well," said the dealer, "that's a little more encouraging. Anybody wanting to make it better?"

A young lad in elaborately-embroidered deerskin with a flushed face leaned upon the table. "Show you how we play cards in the old country," he said. "I'll make it thirty—for a beginning."

There was a momentary silence, for the lad had staked heavily and lost of late, but one or two more bets were made. Then the cards were turned up, and the lad smiled fatuously as he took up his winnings.

"Now I'll let you see," he said. "This time we'll make it fifty."

He won twice more in succession, and the men closed in about the table, while, for the dealer knew when to strike, the glasses went around again, and in the growing interest nobody quite noticed who paid for the refreshment. Then, while the dollars began to trickle in, the lad flung a bill for a hundred down.

"Go on," he said, a trifle huskily. "To-night you can't beat me!"

Once more he won, and just then two men came quietly into the room. One of them signed to the hotel keeper.

"What's going on? The boys seem kind of keen," he said.

The other man laughed a little. "Ferris has struck a streak of luck, but I wouldn't be very sorry if you got him away, Mr. Courthorne. He has had as much as he can carry already, and I don't want anybody broke up in my house. The boys can look out for themselves, but the Silverdale kid has been losing a good deal lately, and he doesn't know when to stop."

Winston glanced at his companion, who nodded. "The young fool!" he said.

They crossed towards the table in time to see the lad take up his winnings again, and Winston laid his hand quietly upon his shoulder.

"Come along and have a drink while you give the rest a show," he said. "You seem to have done tolerably well, and it's usually wise to stop while the chances are going with you."

The lad turned and stared at him with languid insolence in his half-closed eyes, and, though he came of a lineage that had been famous in the old country, there was nothing very prepossessing in his appearance. His mouth was loose, his face weak in spite of its inherited pride, and there was little need to tell either of the men, who noticed his nervous fingers and muddiness of skin, that he was one who in the strenuous early days would have worn the woolly crown.

"Were you addressing me?" he asked.

"I was," said Winston quietly. "I was in fact inviting you to share our refreshment. You see we have just come in."

"Then," said the lad, "it was condemnable impertinence. Since you have taken this fellow up, couldn't you teach him that it's bad taste to thrust his company upon people who don't want it, Dane?"

Winston said nothing, but drew Dane, who flushed a trifle, aside, and when they sat down the latter smiled dryly.

"You have taken on a big contract, Courthorne. How are you going to get the young ass out?" he said.

"Well," said Winston, "it would gratify me to take him by the neck, but as I don't know that it would please the Colonel if I made a public spectacle of one of his retainers, I fancy I'll have to tackle the gambler. I don't know him, but as he comes from across the frontier it's

more than likely he has heard of me. There are advantages in having a record like mine, you see."

"It would, of course, be a kindness to the lad's people—but the young fool is scarcely worth it, and it's not your affair," said Dane reflectively.

Winston guessed the drift of the speech, but he could respect a confidence, and laughed a little. "It's not often I have done any one a good turn, and the novelty has its attractions."

Dane did not appear contented with this explanation, but he asked nothing further, and the two sat watching the men about the table, who were evidently growing eager.

"That's two hundred the kid has let go," said somebody.

There was a murmur of excited voices, and one rose hoarse and a trifle shaky in the consonants above the rest.

"Show you how a gentleman can stand up, boys. Throw them out again. Two hundred this time on the game!"

There was silence and the rustle of shuffled cards; then once more the voices went up. "Against him! Better let up before he takes your farm. Oh, let him face it and show his grit—the man who slings around his hundreds can afford to lose!"

The lad's face showed a trifle paler through the drifting smoke, though a good many of the cigars had gone out now, and once more there was the stillness of expectancy through which a strained voice rose.

"Going to get it all back. I'll stake you four hundred!"

Winston rose and moved forward quietly, with Dane behind him, and then stood still where he could see the table. He had also very observant eyes, and was free

from the excitement of those who had a risk on the game. Still, when the cards were dealt, it was the gambler's face he watched. For a brief space nobody moved, and then the lad flung down his cards and stood up with a grayness in his cheeks and his hands shaking.

"You've got all my money now," he said. "But I'll play you doubles if you'll take my paper."

The gambler nodded and flung down a big pile of bills. "I guess I'll trust you. Mine are here."

The bystanders waited motionless, and none of them made a bet, for any stakes they could offer would be trifles now; but they glanced at the lad, who stood tensely still, while Winston watched the face of the man at the table in front of him. For a moment he saw a flicker of triumph in his eyes, and that decided him. Again, one by one, the cards went down, and then while everybody waited in strained expectancy the lad seemed to grow limp suddenly and groaned.

"You can let up," he said hoarsely. "I've gone down!"

Then a hard brown hand was laid upon the table, and while the rest stared in astonishment, a voice which had a little stern ring in it said, "Turn the whole pack up, and hand over the other one."

In an instant the gambler's hand swept beneath his jacket, but it was a mistaken move, for as swiftly the other hard brown fingers closed upon the pile of bills, and the men, too astonished to murmur, saw Winston leaning very grim in face across the table. Then it tilted over beneath him and the cards were on the gambler's knees, while, as the two men rose and faced each other, something glinted in the hands of one of them.

It is more than probable that the man did not intend to use it, and trusted to its moral effect, for the display

of pistols is not regarded with much toleration on the Canadian prairie. In any case, he had not the opportunity, for in another moment Winston's right hand had closed upon his wrist and the gambler was struggling fruitlessly to extricate it. He was a muscular man, with, doubtless, a sufficiency of nerve, but he had not toiled with his arms and led a Spartan life for eight long years. Before another few seconds had passed he was wondering whether he would ever use that wrist again, while Dane picked up the fallen pistol and put it in his pocket with the bundle of bills Winston handed him.

"Now," said the latter, "I want to do the square thing. If you'll let us strip you and turn out your pockets, we'll see you get any winnings you're entitled to when we've straightened up the cards."

The gambler was apparently not willing, for, though it is possible he would have found it advisable to play an honest game across the frontier, he had evidently surmised that there was less risk of detection among the Canadian farmers. He probably knew they would not wait long for his consent, but in the first stages of the altercation it is not as a rule insuperably difficult for a fearless man to hold his own against an indignant company who have no definite notion of what they mean to do, and it was to cover his retreat he turned to Winston.

"And who the —— are you?" he asked.

Winston smiled grimly. "I guess you have heard of me. Any way, there are a good many places in Montana where they know Lance Courthorne. Quite sure I know a straight game when I see it!"

The man's resistance vanished, but he had evidently been taught the necessity of making the best of defeat in his profession, and he laughed as he swept his glance around at the angry faces turned upon him.

"If you don't there's nobody does," he said. "Still, as you've got my pistol and 'most dislocated my wrist, the least you can do is to get a partner out of this."

There was an ominous murmur, and the lad's face showed livid with fury and humiliation, but Winston turned quietly to the hotel keeper.

"You will take this man with you into your side room and stop with him there," he said. "Dane, give him the bills. The rest of you had better sit down here and make a list of your losses, and you'll get whatever the fellow has upon him divided amongst you. Then, because I ask you, and you'd have had nothing but for me, you'll put him in his wagon and turn him out quietly upon the prairie."

"That's sense, and we don't want no circus here," said somebody.

A few voices were raised in protest, but when it became evident that one or two of the company were inclined to adopt more Draconic measures, Dane spoke quietly and forcibly, and was listened to. Then Winston reached out and grasped the shoulder of the English lad, who made the last attempt to rouse his companions.

"Let them alone, Ferris, and come along. You'll get most of what you lost back to-morrow, and we're going to take you home," he said.

Ferris turned upon him hoarse with passion, flushed in face, and swaying a trifle on his feet, while Winston noticed that he drew one arm back.

"Who are you to lay hands on a gentleman?" he asked. "Keep your distance. I'm going to stay here, and, if I'd had my way, we'd have kicked you out of Silverdale."

Winston dropped his hand, but the next moment the

ornament of a distinguished family was seized by the neck, and the farmer glanced at Dane.

"We've had enough of this fooling, and he'll be grateful to me to-morrow," he said.

Then his captive was thrust, resisting strenuously, out of the room, and with Dane's assistance conveyed to the waiting wagon, into which he was flung almost speechless with indignation.

"Now," said Dane quietly, "you've given us a good deal more trouble than you're worth, Ferris, and if you attempt to get out again I'll break your head for you. Tell Courthorne how much that fellow got from you."

In another ten minutes they had jolted across the railroad track and were speeding through the silence of the lonely prairie. Above them the clear stars flung their cold radiance down through vast distances of liquid indigo, and the soft beat of hoofs was the only sound that disturbed the solemn stillness of the wilderness. Dane drew in a great breath of the cool night air, and laughed quietly.

"It's a good deal more wholesome here in several ways," said he. "If you're wise, you'll let up on card playing and hanging around the settlement, Ferris, and stick to farming. Even if you lose almost as many dollars over it, it will pay you considerably better. Now, that's all I'm going to tell you, but I know what I'm speaking of, because I've had my fling—and it's costing me more than I care to figure out still. You, however, can pull up, because by this time you have no doubt found out a good deal, if you're not all a fool. Curiosity's at the bottom of half our youthful follies, isn't it, Courthorne? We want to know what the things forbidden actually taste like."

"Well," said Winston dryly, "I don't quite know.

You see, I had very little money in the old country and still less leisure here to spend either on that kind of experimenting. Where to get enough to eat was the one problem that worried me."

Dane turned a trifle sharply. "We are, I fancy, tolerably good friends. Isn't it a little unnecessary for you to adopt that tone with me?"

Winston laughed, but made no answer, and their companion said nothing at all. Either the night wind had a drowsy effect on him, or he was moodily resentful, for it was not until Winston pulled up before the homestead whose lands he farmed indifferently under Barrington's supervision, that he opened his mouth.

"You have got off very cheaply to-night, and if you're wise you'll let that kind of thing alone in future," said Winston quietly.

The lad stepped down from the wagon and then stood still. "I resent advice from you as much as I do your—uncalled for insolence an hour or two ago," he said. "To lie low until honest men got used to him would be considerably more becoming to a man like you."

"Well," said Winston, stung into forgetfulness, "I'm not going to offend in that fashion again, and you can go to the devil in the way that most pleases you. In fact, I only pulled you out of the pit to-night because a lady, who apparently takes a quite unwarranted interest in you, asked me to."

Ferris stared up at him, and his face showed almost livid through the luminous night.

"She asked you to!" he said. "By the Lord, I'll make you sorry for this."

Winston said nothing, but shook the reins, and when the wagon lurched forward Dane looked at him.

"I didn't know that before," he said.

"Well," said Winston dryly, "if I hadn't lost my temper with the lad, you wouldn't have known now."

Dane smiled. "You miss the point of it. Our engaging friend made himself the laughing-stock of the colony by favoring Maud Barrington with his attentions when he came out. In fact, I fancy the lady in desperation had to turn her uncle loose on him before he could be made to understand that they were not appreciated. I'd keep my eye on him, Courthorne, for the little beast has shown himself abominably vindictive occasionally, though I have a notion he's scarcely to be held accountable. It's a case of too pure a strain and consanguinity. Two branches of the family—marriage between land and money, you see."

"It will be my heel if he gets in my way," said Winston grimly.

It was late when they reached his homestead, where Dane was to stay the night, and when they went in a youthful figure in uniform rose up in the big log-walled hall. For a moment Winston's heart almost stood still, and then holding himself in hand by a strenuous effort, he moved forward and stood where the light of a lamp did not shine quite fully upon him. He knew that uniform, and he had also seen the lad who wore it, once or twice before, at an outpost six hundred miles away across the prairie. He knew the risk he took was great, but it was evident to him that if his identity escaped detection at first sight, use would do the rest, and while he had worn a short-pointed beard on the Western prairie, he was cleanly shaven now.

The lad stood quite still a moment staring at him, and Winston returning his gaze steadily felt his pulses throb.

"Well, trooper, what has brought you here?" he said.

"Homestead visitation, sir," said the lad, who had a

pleasant English voice. "Mr. Courthorne, I presume—accept my regrets if I stared too hard at you—but for a moment you reminded me of a man I knew. They've changed us round lately, and I'm from the Alberta squadron just sent into this district. It was late when I rode in, and your people were kind enough to put me up."

Winston laughed. "I have been taken for another man before. Would you like anything to drink, or a smoke before you turn in, trooper?"

"No, sir," said the lad. "If you'll sign my docket to show I've been here, I'll get some sleep. I've sixty miles to ride to-morrow."

Winston did as he was asked, and the trooper withdrew, while when they sat down to a last cigar it seemed to Dane that his companion's face was graver than usual.

"Did you notice the lad's astonishment when you came in?" he asked. "He looked very much as if he had seen a ghost."

Winston smiled. "I believe he fancied he had. There was a man in the district he came from, who some folks considered resembled me. In reality, I was by no means like him, and he's dead now."

"Likenesses are curious things, and it's stranger still how folks alter," said Dane. "Now, they've a photograph at Barrington's of you as a boy, and while there is a resemblance in the face, nobody with any discernment would have fancied that lad would grow into a man like you. Still, that's of no great moment, and I want to know just how you spotted the gambler. I had a tolerably expensive tuition in most games of chance in my callow days, and haven't forgotten completely what I was taught then, but though I watched the game, I saw nothing that led me to suspect crooked play."

Winston laughed. "I watched his face, and what I

saw there decided me to try a bluff, but it was not until he turned the table over I knew I was right."

"Well," said Dane dryly, "you don't need your nerves toned up. With only a suspicion to go upon, it was a tolerably risky game. Still, of course, you had advantages."

"I have played a more risky one, but I don't know that I have cause to be very grateful for anything I acquired in the past," said Winston with a curious smile.

Dane stood up and flung his cigar away. "It's time I was asleep," he said. "Still, since our talk has turned in this direction, I want to tell you that, as you have doubtless seen, there is something about you that puzzles me occasionally. I don't ask your confidence until you are ready to give it me—but if ever you want anybody to stand behind you in a difficulty, you'll find me rather more than willing."

He went out, and Winston sat still, very grave in face, for at least another hour.

CHAPTER XIV

A FAIR ADVOCATE

THANKS to the fashion in which the hotel keeper managed the affair, the gambler left the settlement without personal injury, but very little richer than when he entered it. The rest of those who were present at his meeting with Winston were also not desirous that their friends should know that they had been victimized, and because Dane was discreet news of what had happened might never have reached Silverdale had not one of the younger men ridden in to the railroad a few days later. Odd scraps of conversation overheard led him to suspect that something unusual had taken place, but as nobody seemed to be willing to supply details, he returned to Silverdale with his curiosity unsatisfied. As it happened, he was shortly afterwards present at a gathering of his neighbors at Macdonald's farm and came across Ferris there.

"I heard fragments of a curious story at the settlement," he said. "There was trouble of some kind in which a professional gambler figured last Saturday night, and though nobody seemed to want to talk about it, I surmised that somebody from Silverdale was concerned in it."

He had perhaps spoken a trifle more loudly than he had intended, and there were a good many of the Silverdale farmers with a few of their wives and daughters whose attention was not wholly confined to the efforts of Mrs. Macdonald at the piano in the long room just

then. In any case a voice broke through the silence that followed the final chords.

"Ferris could tell us if he liked. He was there that night."

Ferris, who had cause for doing so, looked uncomfortable, and endeavored to sign to the first speaker that it was not desirable to pursue the topic.

"I have been in tolerably often of late. Had things to attend to," he said.

The other man was, however, possessed by a mischievous spirit or did not understand him. "You may just as well tell us now as later, because you never kept a secret in your life," he said.

In the meantime, several of the others had gathered about them, and Mrs. Macdonald, who had joined the group, smiled as she said, "There is evidently something interesting going on. Mayn't I know, Gordon?"

"Of course," said the man who had visited the settlement. "You shall know as much as I do, though that is little, and if it excites your curiosity, you can ask Ferris for the rest. He is only anxious to enhance the value of his story by being mysterious. Well, there was a more or less dramatic happening, of the kind our friends in the old country unwarrantably fancy is typical of the West, in the saloon of the settlement not long ago. Cards, pistols, a professional gambler, and the unmasking of foul play, don't you know. Somebody from Silverdale played the leading rôle."

"How interesting!" said a young English girl. "Now, I used to fancy something of that kind happened here every day before I came out to the prairie. Please tell us, Mr. Ferris! One would like to find there is just a trace of reality in our picturesque fancies of debonair desperadoes and big-hatted cavaliers."

There was a curious expression in Ferris's face, but as he glanced around at the rest, who were regarding him expectantly, he did not observe that Maud Barrington and her aunt had just come in and stood close behind him.

"Can't you see there's no getting out of it, Ferris?" said somebody.

"Well," said the lad in desperation, "I can only admit that Gordon is right. There was foul play and a pistol drawn, but I'm sorry that I can't add anything further. In fact, it wouldn't be quite fair of me."

"But the man from Silverdale?" asked Mrs. Macdonald.

"I'm afraid," said Ferris, with the air of one shielding a friend, "I can't tell you anything about him."

"I know Mr. Courthorne drove in that night," said the young English girl, who was not endued with very much discretion.

"Courthorne," said one of the bystanders, and there was a momentary silence that was very expressive. "Was he concerned in what took place, Ferris?"

"Yes," said the lad with apparent reluctance. "Mrs. Macdonald, you will remember that they dragged it out of me, but I will tell you nothing more whatever."

"It seems to me you have told us quite sufficient and perhaps a trifle too much," said somebody.

There was a curious silence. All of those present were more or less acquainted with Courthorne's past history, and the suggestion of foul play coupled with the mention of a professional gambler had been significant. Ferris, while committing himself in no way, had certainly said sufficient. Then there was a sudden turning of heads as a young woman moved quietly into the midst of the group. She was ominously calm, but she stood very straight, and there was a little hard glitter

in her eyes, which reminded one or two of the men who noticed it of those of Colonel Barrington. The fingers of one hand were also closed at her side.

"I overheard you telling a story, Ferris, but you have a bad memory and left rather too much out," she said.

"They compelled me to tell them what I did, Miss Barrington," said the lad, who winced beneath her gaze. "Now there is really nothing to be gained by going any further into the affair. Shall I play something for you, Mrs. Macdonald?"

He turned as he spoke and would have edged away, but that one of the men at a glance from the girl laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be in a hurry, Ferris. I fancy Miss Barrington has something more to tell you," he said dryly.

The girl thanked him with a gesture. "I want you to supply the most important part," she said, and the lad, saying nothing, changed color under the glance she cast upon him. "You do not seem willing. Then perhaps I had better do it for you. There were two men from Silverdale directly concerned in the affair, and one of them at no slight risk to himself did a very generous thing. That one was Mr. Courthorne. Did you see him lay a single stake upon a card, or do anything that led you to suppose he was there for the purpose of gambling that evening?"

"No," said the lad, seeing she knew the truth, and his hoarse voice was scarcely audible.

"Then," said Maud Barrington, "I want you to tell us what you did see him do."

Ferris said nothing, and though the girl laughed a little as she glanced at the wondering group, her voice was icily disdainful.

"Well," she said, "I will tell you. You saw him

question a professional gambler's play to save a man who had no claim on him from ruin, and, with only one comrade to back him, drive the swindler, who had a pistol, from the field. He had, you admit, no interest of any kind in the game."

Ferris had grown crimson again, and the veins on his forehead showed swollen high. "No," he said almost abjectly.

Maud Barrington turned from him to her hostess as she answered, "That will suffice, in the meanwhile, until I can decide whether it is desirable to make known the rest of the tale. I brought the new song Evelyn wanted, Mrs. Macdonald, and I will play it for her, if she would care to try it."

She moved away with the elder lady, and left the rest astonished to wonder what had become of Ferris, who was seen no more that evening, while presently Winston came in.

His face was a trifle weary, for he had toiled since the sun rose above the rim of the prairie and when the arduous day was over and those who worked for him were glad to rest their aching limbs, had driven two leagues to Macdonald's. Why he had done so, he was not willing to admit, but he glanced around the long room anxiously as he came in, and his eyes brightened as they rested on Maud Barrington. They were, however, observant eyes, and he noticed that there was a trifle more color than usual in the girl's pale-tinted face, and signs of suppressed curiosity about some of the rest. When he had greeted his hostess he turned to one of the men.

"It seems to me you are either trying not to see something, Gordon, or to forget it as soon as you can," he said.

Gordon laughed at little. "You are not often mis-

taken, Courthorne. That is precisely what we are doing. I presume you haven't heard what occurred here an hour ago?"

"No!" said Winston. "I'm not very curious if it does not concern me."

Gordon looked at him steadily. "I fancy it does. You see that young fool Ferris was suggesting that you had been mixed up in something not very creditable at the settlement lately. As it happened, Maud Barrington overheard him and made him retract before the company. She did it effectively, and if it had been any one else, the scene would have been almost theatrical. Still, you know nothing seems out of place when it comes from the Colonel's niece. Nor if you had heard her would you have wanted a better advocate."

For a moment the bronze deepened in Winston's forehead, and there was a gleam in his eyes, but though it passed as rapidly as it came, Gordon had seen it and smiled when the farmer moved away.

"That's a probability I never counted on," he thought. "Still, I fancy if it came about, it would suit everybody but the Colonel."

Then he turned as Mrs. Macdonald came up to him. "What are you doing here alone when I see there is nobody talking to the girl from Winnipeg?"

The man laughed a little. "I was wondering whether it is a good sign or otherwise when a young woman is, so far as she can decently be, uncivil to a man who desires her good-will."

Mrs. Macdonald glanced at him sharply, and then shook her head. "The question is too deep for you—and it is not your affair. Besides, haven't you seen that indiscreet freedom of speech is not encouraged at Silverdale?"

In the meanwhile Winston, crossing the room, took a vacant place at Maud Barrington's side. She turned her head a moment and looked at him.

Winston nodded. "Yes, I heard," he said. "Why did you do it?"

Maud Barrington made a little gesture of impatience. "That is quite unnecessary. You know I sent you."

"Yes," said Winston, a trifle dryly, "I see. You would have felt mean if you hadn't defended me?"

"No," said the girl, with a curious smile. "That was not exactly the reason, but we cannot talk too long here. Dane is anxious to take us home in his new buggy, but it would apparently be a very tight fit for three. Will you drive me over?"

Winston only nodded, for Mrs. Macdonald approached in pursuit of him, but he spent the rest of the evening in a state of expectancy, and Maud Barrington fancied that his hard hands were suspiciously unresponsive as she took them when he helped her into the Silverdale wagon—a vehicle a strong man could have lifted, and in no way resembling its English prototype. The team was mettlesome, the lights of Macdonald's homestead soon faded behind them, and they were racing with many a lurch and jolt straight as the crow flies across the prairie.

There was no moon, but the stars shone far up in the soft indigo, and the grasses whirled back in endless ripples to the humming wheels, dimmed to the dusky blue that suffused the whole intermerging sweep of earth and sky. The sweetness of wild peppermint rose through the coolness of the dew, and the voices of the wilderness were part of the silence that was but the perfect balance of the nocturnal harmonies. The two who knew and loved the prairie could pick out each one of them. Nor

did it seem that there was any need of speech on such a night, but at last Winston turned with a little smile to his companion, as he checked the horses on the slope of a billowy rise.

"One feels diffident about intruding on this great quietness," he said. "Still, I fancy you had a purpose in asking me to drive you home."

"Yes," said the girl, with a curious gentleness. "In the first place, though I know it isn't necessary with you, I want to thank you. I made Dane tell me, and you have done all I wished—splendidly."

Winston laughed. "Well, you see, it naturally came easy to me."

Maud Barrington noticed the trace of grimness in his voice. "Please try to overlook our unkindness," she said. "Is it really needful to keep reminding me? And how was I to know what you were, when I had only heard that wicked story?"

Winston felt a little thrill run through him, for which reason he looked straight in front of him and shifted his grasp on the reins. Disdainful and imperious as she was at times, he knew there was a wealth of softer qualities in his companion now. Her daintiness in thought and person, and honesty of purpose, appealed to him, while that night her mere physical presence had an effect that was almost bewildering. For a moment he wondered vaguely how far a man might dare to go, with what fate had thrust upon him, and then with a little shiver saw once more the barrier of deceit and imposture.

"You believe it was not a true one?" he asked.

"Of course," said Maud Barrington. "How could it be? And you have been very patient under our sus-

picions. Now, if you still value the good-will you once asked for, it is yours absolutely."

"But you may still hear unpleasant stories about me," said Winston, with a note the girl had not heard before in his voice.

"I should not believe them," she said.

"Still," persisted Winston, "if the tales were true?"

Maud Barrington did nothing by halves. "Then I should remember that there is always so much we do not know which would put a different color on any story, and I believe they could never be true again."

Winston checked a little gasp of wonder and delight, and Maud Barrington looked away across the prairie. She was not usually impulsive and seldom lightly bestowed gifts that were worth the having, and the man knew that the faith in him she had confessed to was the result of a conviction that would last until he himself shattered it. Then, in the midst of his elation, he shivered again and drew the lash across the near horse's back. The wonder and delight he felt had suddenly gone.

"Few would venture to predict as much. Now and then I feel that our deeds are scarcely contrived by our own will, and one could fancy our parts had been thrust upon us in a grim joke," he said. "For instance, isn't it strange that I should have a share in the rousing of Silverdale to a sense of its responsibilities? Lord, what I could make of it, if fate had but given me a fair opportunity!"

He spoke almost fiercely, but the words did not displease the girl. The forceful ring in his voice set something thrilling within her, and she knew by this time that his assertions seldom went beyond the fact.

"But you will have the opportunity, and we need you here," she said.

"No," said Winston slowly. "I am afraid not. Still, I will finish the work I see in front of me. That at least—one cannot hope for the unattainable."

Maud Barrington was sensible of a sudden chill. "Still, if one has strength and patience, is anything quite unattainable?"

Winston looked out across the prairie, and for a moment the demons of pride and ambition rioted within him. He knew there were in him the qualities that compel success, and the temptation to stretch out a daring hand and take all he longed for grew almost overmastering. Still, he also knew how strong the innate prejudices of caste and tradition are in most women of his companion's station, and she had never hidden one aspect of her character from him. It was with a smothered groan he realized that if he flung the last shred of honor aside and grasped the forbidden fruit it would turn to bitterness in his mouth.

"Yes," he said very slowly. "There is a limit which only fools would pass."

Then there was silence for a while, until, as they swept across the rise, Maud Barrington laughed as she pointed to the lights that blinked in the hollow, and Winston realized that the barrier between them stood firm again.

"Our views seldom coincide for very long, but there is something else to mention before we reach the Grange," she said. "You must have paid out a good many dollars for the plowing of your land and mine, and nobody's exchequer is inexhaustible at Silverdale. Now I want you to take a check from me."

"It is necessary that I should?"

"Of course," said the girl, with a trace of displeasure.

Winston laughed. "Then I shall be prepared to hand you my account whenever you demand it."

He did not look at his companion again, but with a tighter grip than there was any need for on the reins, sent the light wagon jolting down the slope to Silverdale Grange.

CHAPTER XV

THE UNEXPECTED

THE sun beat down on the prairie, which was already losing its flush of green, but it was cool where Maud Barrington and her aunt stood in the shadow of the bluff by Silverdale Grange. The birches, tasseled now with whispering foliage, divided the homestead from the waste which would lie white and desolate under the parching heat, and that afternoon it seemed to the girl that the wall of green shut out more than the driving dust and sun-glare from the Grange, for where the trees were thinner she could see moving specks of men and horses athwart the skyline.

They had toiled in the sun-baked furrow since the first flush of crimson streaked the prairie's rim, and the chill of dusk would fall upon the grasses before their work was done. Those men who bore the burden and heat of the day were, the girl knew, helots now, but there was in them the silent vigor and something of the somberness of the land of rock and forest they came from, and a time would come when others would work for them. Winning slowly, holding grimly, they were moving on, while secure in its patrician tranquillity Silverdale stood still, and Maud Barrington smiled curiously as she glanced down at the long white robe that clung very daintily about her and then towards her companions in the tennis field. Her apparel had cost many dollars in Montreal, and there was a joyous irresponsibility in the faces of those she watched.

"It is a little unequal, isn't it, aunt?" she said. "One feels inclined to wonder what we have done that we should have exemption from the charge laid upon the first tiller of the soil that we, and the men who are plodding through the dust there, are descended from."

Miss Barrington laughed a little as she glanced with a nod of comprehension at the distant toilers, and more gravely towards the net. Merry voices came up to her through the shadows of the trees as English lad and English maiden, lissom and picturesque in many-hued jackets and light dresses, flitted across the little square of velvet green. The men had followed the harrow and seeder a while that morning. Some of them, indeed, had for a few hours driven a team, and then left the rest to the hired hands, for the stress and sweat of effort that was to turn the wilderness into a granary was not for such as they.

"Don't you think it is all made up to those others?" she asked.

"In one sense—yes," said the girl. "Of course, one can see that all effort must have its idealistic aspect, and there may be men who find their compensation in the thrill of the fight, and the knowledge of work well done when they rest at night. Still, I fancy most of them only toil to eat, and their views are not revealed to us. We are, you see, women—and we live at Silverdale."

Her aunt smiled again. "How long is it since the plow crossed the Red River, and what is Manitoba now? How did those mile furrows come there, and who drove the road that takes the wheat out through the granite of the Superior shore? It was more than their appetites that impelled those men, my dear. Still, it is scarcely wise to expect too much when one meets them, for

though one could feel it is presumptuous to forgive its deficiencies, the Berserk type of manhood is not conspicuous for its refinement."

For no apparent reason Maud Barrington evaded her aunt's gaze. "You," she said dryly, "have forgiven one of that type a good deal already, but, at least, we have never seen him when the fit was upon him."

Miss Barrington laughed. "Still, I have no doubt that, sooner or later, you will enjoy the spectacle."

Just then, a light wagon came up behind them, and when one of the hired men helped them in they swept out of the cool shade into the dust and glare of the prairie, and when some little time later, with the thud of hoofs and rattle of wheels softened by the bleaching sod, they rolled down a rise, there was spread out before them evidence of man's activity.

Acre by acre, gleaming chocolate brown against the gray and green of the prairie, the wheat loam rolled away, back to the ridge, over it, and on again. It was such a breadth of sowing as had but once, when wheat was dear, been seen at Silverdale, but still across the foreground, advancing in echelon, came lines of dusty teams, and there was a meaning in the furrows they left behind them, for they were not plowing where the wheat had been. Each wave of lustrous clods that rolled from the gleaming shares was so much rent from the virgin prairie, and a promise of what would come when man had fulfilled his mission and the wilderness would blossom. There was a wealth of food stored, little by little during ages past counting, in every yard of the crackling sod to await the time when the toiler with the sweat of the primeval curse upon his forehead should unseal it with the plow. It was also borne in upon Maud Barrington that the man who directed those

energies was either altogether without discernment, or one who saw further than his fellows and had an excellent courage, when he flung his substance into the furrows while wheat was going down. Then as the hired man pulled up the wagon she saw him.

A great plow with triple shares had stopped at the end of the furrow, and the leading horses were apparently at variance with the man who, while he gave of his own strength to the uttermost, was asking too much from them. Young and indifferently broken, tortured by swarming insects, and galled by the strain of the collar, they had laid back their ears, and the wickedness of the bronco strain shone in their eyes. One rose almost upright amid a clatter of harness, its mate squealed savagely, and the man who loosed one hand from the headstall flung out an arm. Then he and the pair whirled round together amid the trampled clods in a blurred medley of spume-flecked bodies, soil-stained jean, flung-up hoofs, and an arm that swung and smote again. Miss Barrington grew a trifle pale as she watched, but a little glow crept into her niece's eyes.

The struggle, however, ended suddenly, and hailing a man who plodded behind another team, Winston picked up his broad hat, which was trampled into shapelessness, and turned towards the wagon. There was dust and spume upon him, a rent in the blue shirt, and the knuckles of one hand dripped red, but he laughed as he said, "I did not know we had an audience, but this, you see, is necessary."

"Is it?" asked Miss Barrington, who glanced at the plowing. "When wheat is going down?"

Winston nodded. "Yes," he said. "I mean, to me; and the price of wheat is only one part of the question."

Miss Barrington stretched out her hand, though her

niece said nothing at all. "Of course, but I want you to help us down. Maud has an account you have not sent in to ask you for."

Winston first turned to the two men who now stood by the idle machine. "You'll have to drive those beasts of mine as best you can, Tom, and Jake will take your team. Get them off again now. This piece of breaking has to be put through before we loose again."

Then he handed his visitors down, and Maud Barrington fancied as he walked with them to the house that the fashion in which the damaged hat hung down over his eyes would have rendered most other men ludicrous. He left them a space in his bare sitting-room, which suggested only grim utility, and Miss Barrington smiled when her niece glanced at her.

"And this is how Lance, the profligate, lives!" said she.

Maud Barrington shook her head. "No," she said. "Can you believe that this man was ever a prodigal?"

Her aunt was a trifle less astonished than she would once have been, but before she could answer Winston, who had made a trifling change in his clothing, came in.

"I can give you some green tea, though I am afraid it might be a good deal better than it is, and our crockery is not all you have been used to," he said. "You see, we have only time to think of one thing until the sowing is through."

Miss Barrington's eyes twinkled. "And then?"

"Then," said Winston, with a little laugh, "there will be prairie hay to cut, and after that the harvest coming on."

"In the meanwhile, it was business that brought me here, and I have a check with me," said Maud Barrington. "Please let us get it over first of all."

Winston sat down at a table and scribbled on a strip of paper. "That," he said gravely, "is what you owe me for the plowing."

There was a little flush in his face as he took the check the girl filled in, and both felt somewhat grateful for the entrance of a man in blue jean with the tea. It was of very indifferent quality, and he had sprinkled a good deal on the tray, but Winston felt a curious thrill as he watched the girl pour it out at the head of the bare table. Her white dress gleamed in the light of a dusty window, and the shadowy cedar boarding behind her forced up each line of the shapely figure. Again the maddening temptation took hold of him, and he wondered whether he had betrayed too much when he felt the elder lady's eyes upon him. There was a tremor in his brown fingers as he took the cup held out to him, but his voice was steady.

"You can scarcely fancy how pleasant this is," he said. "For eight years, in fact ever since I left England, no woman has ever done any of these graceful little offices for me."

Miss Barrington glanced at her niece, and both of them knew that, if the lawyer had traced Courthorne's past correctly, this could not be true. Still, there was no disbelief in the elder lady's eyes, and the girl's faith remained unshaken.

"Eight years," she said, with a little smile, "is a very long while."

"Yes," said Winston, "horribly long, and one year at Silverdale is worth them all—that is, a year like this one, which is going to be remembered by all who have sown wheat on the prairie, and that leads up to something. When I have plowed all my own holding, I shall not be content, and I want to make another bar-

gain. Give me the use of your unbroken land, and I will find horses, seed, and men, while we will share what it yields us when the harvest is in."

The girl was astonished. This, she knew, was splendid audacity, for the man had already staked very heavily on the crop he had sown, and while the daring of it stirred her she sat silent a moment.

"I could lose nothing, but you will have to bring out a host of men, and have risked so much," she said. "Nobody but you and me and three or four others in all the province is plowing more than half his holdings."

The suggestion of comradeship set Winston's blood tingling, but it was with a little laugh he turned over the pile of papers on the table, and then took them up in turn.

"'Very little plowing has been done in the tracts of Minnesota previously alluded to. Farmers find wheat cannot be grown at present prices, and there is apparently no prospect of a rise,'" he read. "'The Dakota wheat-growers are mostly fallowing. They can't quite figure how they would get eighty cents for the dollar's worth of seeding this year. Milling very quiet in Winnipeg. No inquiries from Europe coming in, and Manitoba dealers, generally, find little demand for harrows or seeders this year. Reports from Assiniboia seem to show that the one hope this season will be mixed farming and the neglect of cereals.'"

"There is only one inference," he said. "When the demand comes, there will be nothing to meet it with."

"When it comes," said Maud Barrington quietly. "But you who believe it will stand alone."

"Almost," said Winston. "Still, there are a few much cleverer men who feel as I do. I can't give you all my reasons, or read you the sheaf of papers from the

Pacific slope, London, New York, Australia, but while men lose hope, and little by little the stocks run down, the world must be fed. Just as sure as the harvest follows the sowing, it will wake up suddenly to the fact that it is hungry. They are buying cotton and scattering their money in other nation's bonds in the old country now, for they and the rest of Europe forget their necessities at times, but is it impossible to picture them finding their granaries empty and clamoring for bread?"

It was a crucial test of faith, and the man knew it, as the woman did. He stood alone, with the opinions of the multitude against him, but there was, Maud Barrington felt, a great if undefinable difference between his quiet resolution and the gambler's recklessness. Once more the boldness of his venture stirred her, and this time there was a little flash in her eyes as she bore witness to her perfect confidence.

"You shall have the land, every acre of it, to do what you like with, and I will ask no questions whether you win or lose," she said.

Then Miss Barrington glanced at him in turn. "Lance, I have a thousand dollars I want you to turn into wheat for me."

Winston's fingers trembled, and a darker hue crept into his tan. "Madam," he said, "I can take no money from you."

"You must," said the little, white-haired lady. "For your mother's sake, Lance. It is a brave thing you are doing, and you are the son of one who was my dearest friend."

Winston turned his head away, and both women wondered when he looked round again. His face seemed a trifle drawn, and his voice was strained.

"I hope," he said slowly, "it will in some degree

make amends for others I have done. In the meanwhile, there are reasons why your confidence humiliates me."

Miss Barrington rose and her niece after her. "Still, I believe it is warranted, and you will remember there are two women who have trusted you, hoping for your success. And now, I fancy we have kept you too long."

Winston stood holding the door open a moment, with his head bent, and then suddenly straightened himself.

"I can at least be honest with you in this venture," he said with a curious quietness.

Nothing further was said, but when his guests drove away Winston sat still a while and then went back very grim in face to his plowing. He had passed other unpleasant moments of that kind since he came to Silverdale, and long afterwards the memory of them brought a flush to his face. The excuses he had made seemed worthless when he strove to view what he had done, and was doing, through those women's eyes.

It was dusk when he returned to the homestead, worn out in body but more tranquil in mind, and stopped a moment in the doorway to look back on the darkening sweep of the plowing. He felt with no misgivings that his time of triumph would come, and in the meanwhile the handling of this great farm with all the aids that money could buy him was a keen joy to him; but each time he met Maud Barrington's eyes he realized the more surely that the hour of his success must also see accomplished an act of abnegation, which he wondered with a growing fear whether he could find the strength for. Then as he went in a man who cooked for his hired assistants came to meet him.

"There's a stranger inside waiting for you," he said. "Wouldn't tell me what he wanted, but sat right down

as if the place was his, and helped himself without asking to your cigars. Wanted something to drink, too, and smiled at me kind of wicked when I brought him the cider."

The room was almost dark when Winston entered it, and stood still a moment staring at a man who sat, cigar in hand, quietly watching him. His appearance was curiously familiar, but Winston could not see his face until he moved forward another step or two. Then he stopped once more, and the two saying nothing looked at one another. It was Winston who spoke first, and his voice was very even.

"What do you want here?" he asked.

The other man laughed. "Isn't that a curious question when the place is mine? You don't seem overjoyed to see me come to life again."

Winston sat down and slowly lighted a cigar. "We need not go into that. I asked you what you want."

"Well," said Courthorne dryly, "it is not a great deal. Only the means to live in a manner more befitting a gentleman than I have been able to do lately."

"You have not been prospering?" and Winston favored his companion with a slow scrutiny.

"No," and Courthorne laughed again. "You see, I could pick up a tolerable living as Lance Courthorne, but there is very little to be made at my business when you commence in new fields as an unknown man."

"Well," said Winston coldly, "I don't know that it wouldn't be better to face my trial than stay here at your mercy. So far as my inclinations go, I would sooner fight than have any further dealings with a man like you."

Courthorne shook his head. "I fixed up the thing too well, and you would be convicted. Still, we'll not

go into that, and you will not find me unreasonable. A life at Silverdale would not suit me, and you know by this time that it would be difficult to sell the place, while I don't know where I could find a tenant who would farm it better than you. That being so, it wouldn't be good policy to bleed you too severely. Still, I want a thousand dollars in the meanwhile. It's mine, you see."

Winston sat still a minute. He was sensible of a fierce distrust and hatred of the man before him, but he felt he must at least see the consummation of his sowing.

"Then you shall have it on condition that you go away, and stay away, until harvest is over. After that, I will send for you and shall have more to tell you. If in the meantime you come back here, or hint that I am Winston, I will surrender to the police, or decide our differences in another fashion."

Courthorne nodded. "That is direct," he said. "One knows where he is when he deals with a man who talks as you do. Now, are you not curious as to the way I cheated both the river and the police?"

"No," said Winston grimly, "not in the least. We will talk business together when it is necessary, but I can only decline to discuss anything else with you."

Courthorne laughed. "There's nothing to be gained by pretending to misunderstand you, but it wouldn't pay me to be resentful when I'm graciously willing to let you work for me. Still, I have been inclined to wonder how you were getting on with my estimable relatives and connections. One of them has, I hear, unbent a trifle towards you, but I would like to warn you not to presume on any small courtesy shown you by the younger Miss Barrington."

Winston stood up and set his back to the door. "You

heard my terms, but if you mention that lady again in connection with me, it would suit me equally well to make good all I owe you very differently."

Courthorne did not appear in any way disconcerted, but, before he could answer, a man outside opened the door.

"Here's Sergeant Stimson and one of his troopers wanting you," he said.

Winston looked at Courthorne, but the latter smiled. "The visit has nothing to do with me. It is probably accidental, but I fancy Stimson knows me, and it wouldn't be advisable for him to see us both together. Now, I wonder whether you could make it fifteen hundred dollars."

"No," said Winston. "Stay if it pleases you."

Courthorne shook his head. "I don't know that it would. You don't do it badly, Winston."

He went out by another door, almost as the grizzled sergeant came in and stood still, looking at the master of the homestead.

"I haven't seen you since I came here, Mr. Courthorne, and now you remind me of another man I once had dealings with," he said.

Winston laughed a little. "I scarcely fancy that is very civil, Sergeant."

"Well," said the prairie-rider, "there is a difference, when I look at you more closely. Let me see, I met you once or twice back there in Alberta?"

He appeared to be reflecting, but Winston was on his guard. "More frequently, I fancy, but you had nothing definite against me, and the times have changed. I would like to point that out to you civilly. Your chiefs are also on good terms with us at Silverdale, you see."

The sergeant laughed. "Well, sir, I meant no of-

fense, and called round to requisition a horse. One of the Whitesod boys has been deciding a quarrel with a neighbor with an ax, and while I fancy they want me at once, my beast got his foot in a badger-hole."

"Tell Tom in the stables to let you have your choice," said Winston. "If you like them, there's no reason you shouldn't take some of these cigars along."

The sergeant went out, and when the beat of hoofs sank into the silence of the prairie, Winston called Courthorne in. "I have offered you no refreshment, but the best in the house is at your service," he said.

Courthorne looked at him curiously, and for the first time Winston noticed that the life he had led was telling upon his companion.

"As your guest?" he asked.

"Yes," said Winston. "I am tenant here, and, that I may owe you nothing, purpose paying you a second thousand dollars when the crop is in, as well as bank-rate interest on the value of the stock and machines and the money I have used, as shown in the documents handed me by Colonel Barrington. With wheat at its present price nobody would give you more for the land. In return, I demand the unconditional use of the farm until within three months from harvest. I have the elevator warrants for whatever wheat I raise, which will belong to me. If you do not agree, or remain here after sunrise to-morrow, I shall ride over to the outpost and make a declaration."

"Well," said Courthorne slowly, "you can consider it a deal."

CHAPTER XVI

FACING THE FLAME

COURTHORNE rode away next morning, and some weeks had passed when Maud Barrington came upon Winston sitting beside his mower in a sloo. He did not at first see her, for the rattle of the machines in a neighboring hollow drowned the muffled beat of hoofs, and the girl, reining her horse in, looked down on him. The man was sitting very still, which was unusual for him, hammer in his hand, gazing straight before him, as though he could see something beyond the shimmering heat that danced along the rim of the prairie.

Summer had come, and the grass, which grew scarcely ankle-deep on the great levels, was once more white and dry, but in the hollows that had held the melting snow it stood waist-high, scented with peppermint, harsh and wiry, and Winston had set out with every man he had to harvest it. Already a line of loaded wagons crawled slowly across the prairie, and men and horses moved half-seen amid the dust that whirled about another sloo. Out of it came the trampling of hoofs and the musical tinkle of steel.

Suddenly Winston looked up, and the care which was stamped upon it fled from his face when he saw the girl. The dust that lay thick upon his garments had spared her, and as she sat, patting the restless horse, with a little smile on her face which showed beneath the big white hat, something in her dainty freshness reacted upon the tired man's fancy. He had long borne the stress and the burden, and as he watched her a long-

ing came upon him, as it had too often for his tranquillity since he had been at Silverdale, to taste, for a short space of time at least, a life of leisure and refinement. This woman who had been born to it could, it seemed to him, lift the man she trusted beyond the sordid cares of the turmoil to her own high level, and as he waited for her to speak, a fit of passion shook him. It betrayed itself only by the sudden hardening of his face.

"It is the first time I have surprised you idle. You were dreaming," she said.

Winston smiled a trifle mirthlessly. "I was, but I am afraid the fulfillment of the dreams is not for me. One is apt to be pulled up suddenly when he ventures overfar."

"We are inquisitive, you know," said Maud Barrington; "can't you tell me what they were?"

Winston did not know what impulse swayed him, and afterwards blamed himself for complying, but the girl's interest compelled him, and he showed her a little of what was in his heart.

"I fancied I saw Silverdale gorging the elevators with the choicest wheat," he said. "A new bridge flung level across the ravine where the wagons go down half-loaded to the creek; a dam turning the hollow into a lake, and big turbines driving our own flouring mill. Then there were herds of cattle fattening on the strippings of the grain that wasteful people burn, our products clamored for, east in the old country and west in British Columbia—and for a back-ground, prosperity and power, even if it was paid for with half the traditions of Silverdale. Still, you see it may all be due to the effect of the fierce sunshine on an idle man's fancy."

Maud Barrington regarded him steadily, and the smile died out of her eyes. "But," she said slowly, "is

all that quite beyond realization. Could you not bring it about?"

Winston saw her quiet confidence and something of her pride. There was no avarice in this woman, but the slight dilation of the nostrils and the glow in her eyes told of ambition, and for a moment his soul was not his own.

"I could," he said, and Maud Barrington, who watched the swift straightening of his shoulders and lifting of his head, felt that he spoke no more than the truth. Then with a sudden access of bitterness, "But I never will."

"Why?" she asked. "Have you grown tired of Silverdale, or has what you pictured no charm for you?"

Winston leaned, as it were wearily, against the wheel of the mower. "I wonder if you could understand what my life has been. The crushing poverty that rendered every effort useless from the beginning, the wounds that come from using imperfect tools, and the numb hopelessness that follows repeated failure. They are tolerably hard to bear alone, but it is more difficult to make the best of them when the poorly-fed body is as worn out as the mind. To stay here would be—paradise—but a glimpse of it will probably have to suffice. Its gates are well guarded, and without are the dogs, you know."

Something in Maud Barrington thrilled in answer to the faint hoarseness in Winston's voice, and she did not resent it. She was a woman with all her sex's instinctive response to passion and emotion, though as yet the primitive impulses that stir the hearts of men had been covered if not wholly hidden from her by the thin veneer of civilization. Now, at least, she felt in touch with them, and for a moment she looked at the

man with a daring that matched his own shining in her eyes.

"And you fear the angel with the sword?" she said. "There is nothing so terrible at Silverdale."

"No," said Winston. "I think it is the load I have to carry I fear the most."

For the moment Maud Barrington had flung off the bonds of conventionality. "Lance," she said, "you have proved your right to stay at Silverdale, and would not what you are doing now cover a great deal in the past?"

Winston smiled wryly. "It is the present that is difficult," he said. "Can a man be pardoned and retain the offense?"

He saw the faint bewilderment in the girl's face give place to the resentment of frankness unreturned, and with a little shake of his shoulders shrank into himself. Maud Barrington, who understood it, once more put on the becoming reticence of Silverdale.

"We are getting beyond our depth, and it is very hot," she said. "You have all this hay to cut!"

Winston laughed as he bent over the mower's knife. "Yes," he said, "it is really more in my line, and I have kept you in the sun too long."

In another few moments Maud Barrington was riding across the prairie, but when the rattle of the machine rose from the sloo behind her, she laughed curiously.

"The man knew his place, but you came perilously near making a fool of yourself this morning, my dear," she said.

It was a week or two later, and very hot, when, with others of his neighbors, Winston sat in the big hall at Silverdale Grange. The windows were open wide and

the smell of hot dust came in from the white waste which rolled away beneath the stars. There was also another odor in the little puffs of wind that flickered in, and far off where the arch of indigo dropped to the dusky earth, wavy lines of crimson moved along the horizon. It was then the season when fires that are lighted by means which no man knows creep up and down the waste of grass, until they put on speed and roll in a surf of flame before a sudden breeze. Still, nobody was anxious about them, for the guarding furrows that would oppose a space of dusty soil to the march of the flame had been plowed round every homestead at Silverdale.

Maud Barrington was at the piano and her voice was good, while Winston, who had known what it is to toil from red dawn to sunset without hope of more than daily food, found the simple song she had chosen chime with his mood. "All day long the reapers."

A faint staccato drumming that rose from the silent prairie throbbed through the final chords of it, and when the music ceased, swelled into the gallop of a horse. It seemed in some curious fashion portentous, and when there was a rattle and jingle outside other eyes than Winston's were turned towards the door. It swung open presently and Dane came in. There was quiet elation and some diffidence in his bronzed face as he turned to Colonel Barrington.

"I could not get away earlier from the settlement, sir, but I have great news," he said. "They have awoke to the fact that stocks are getting low in the old country. Wheat moved up at Winnipeg, and there was almost a rush to buy yesterday."

There was a sudden silence, for among those present

were men who remembered the acres of good soil they had not plowed, but a little grim smile crept into their leader's face.

"It is," he said quietly, "too late for most of us. Still, we will not grudge you your good fortune, Dane. You and a few of the others owe it to Courthorne."

Every eye was on the speaker, for it had become known among his neighbors that he had sold for a fall; but Barrington could lose gracefully. Then both his niece and Dane looked at Winston with a question in their eyes.

"Yes," he said very quietly, "it is the turning of the tide."

He crossed over to Barrington, who smiled at him dryly as he said, "It is a trifle soon to admit that I was wrong."

Winston made a gesture of almost impatient deprecation. "I was wondering how far I might presume, sir. You have forward wheat to deliver?"

"I have," said Barrington, "unfortunately a good deal. You believe the advance will continue?"

"Yes," said Winston simply. "It is but the beginning, and there will be a reflux before the stream sets in. Wait a little, sir, and then telegraph your broker to cover all your contracts when the price drops again."

"I fancy it would be wiser to cut my losses now," said Barrington dryly.

Then Winston did a somewhat daring thing, for he raised his voice a trifle, in a fashion that seemed to invite the attention of the rest of the company.

"The more certain the advance seems to be, the fiercer will be the bears' last attack," he said. "They have to get from under, and will take heavy chances to force prices back. As yet they may contrive to check

or turn the stream, and then every wise man who has sold down will try to cover, but no one can tell how far it may carry us, once it sets strongly in!"

The men understood, as did Colonel Barrington, that they were being warned, as it were, above their leader's head, and his niece, while resenting the slight, admitted the courage of the man. Barrington's face was sardonic, and a less resolute man would have winced under the implication as he said:

"This is, no doubt, intuition. I fancy you told us you had no dealings on the markets at Winnipeg."

Winston looked steadily at the speaker, and the girl noticed with a curious approval that he smiled.

"Perhaps it is, but I believe events will prove me right. In any case, what I had the honor of telling you and Miss Barrington was the fact," he said.

Nobody spoke, and the girl was wondering by what means the strain could be relieved, which, though few heard what Barrington said, all seemed to feel, when out of the darkness came a second beat of hoofs, and by and by a man swaying on the driving-seat of a jolting wagon swept into the light from the windows. Then there were voices outside, and a breathless lad came in.

"A big grass fire coming right down on Courthorne's farm!" he said. "It was tolerably close when I got away."

In an instant there was commotion, and every man in Silverdale Grange was on his feet. For the most part, they took life lightly, and looked upon their farming as an attempt to combine the making of dollars with gentlemanly relaxation; but there were no laggards among them when there was perilous work to be done, and they went out to meet the fire joyously. Inside five minutes scarcely a horse remained in the stables, and the

men were flying at a gallop across the dusky prairie, laughing at the risk of a stumble in a deadly badger-hole. Yet, in the haste of saddling, they found time to arrange a twenty-dollar sweepstake and the allowance for weight.

Up the long rise, and down the back of it, they swept, stirrup by stirrup and neck by neck, while the roar of the hoofs reft the silence of the prairie like the roll of musketry. Behind came the wagons, lurching up the slope, and the blood surged to the brave young faces as the night wind smote them and fanned into brightness the crimson smear on the horizon. They were English lads of the stock that had furnished their nation's fighting line, and not infrequently counted no sacrifice too great that brought their colors home first on the racing turf. Still, careless to the verge of irresponsibility as they were in most affairs that did not touch their pride, the man who rode with red spurs and Dane next behind him, a clear length before the first of them, asked no better allies in what was to be done.

Then the line drew out as the pace began to tell, though the rearmost rode grimly, knowing the risks the leaders ran, and that the chance of being first to meet the fire might yet fall to them. There was not one among them who would not have killed his best horse for that honor, and for further incentive the Colonel's niece, in streaming habit, flitted in front of them. She had come up from behind them, and passed them on a rise, for Barrington disdained to breed horses for dollars alone, and there was blood well known on the English turf in the beast she rode.

By and by, a straggling birch bluff rose blackly across their way, but nobody swung wide. Swaying low while the branches smote them, they went through, the twigs

crackling under foot, and here and there the red drops trickling down a flushed, scarred face, for the slanting rent of a birch bough cuts like a knife. Dim trees whirled by them, undergrowth went down, and they were out on the dusty grass again, while, like field guns wanted at the front, the bouncing wagons went through behind. Then the fire rose higher in front of them, and when they topped the last rise the pace grew faster still. The slope they thundered down was undermined by gophers and seamed by badger-holes, but they took their chances gleefully, sparing no effort of hand and heel, for the sum of twenty dollars and the credit of being first man in. Then the smoke rolled up to them, and when eager hands drew bridle at last, a youthful voice rose breathlessly out of it:

"Stapleton a good first, but he'll go back on weight. It used to be black and orange when he was at home."

There was a ripple of hoarse laughter, a gasping cheer, and then silence, for now their play was over, and it was with the grim quietness, which is not unusual with their kind, the men of Silverdale turned towards the fire. It rolled towards the homestead, a waving crimson wall, not fast, but with remorseless persistency, out of the dusky prairie, and already the horses were plunging in the smoke of it. That, however, did not greatly concern the men, for the bare fire furrows stretched between themselves and it; but there was also another blaze inside the defenses, and, unless it was checked, nothing could save house and barns and granaries, rows of costly binders, and stock of prairie hay. They looked for a leader, and found one ready, for Winston's voice came up through the crackle of the fire:

"Some of you lead the saddle-horses back to the willows and picket them. The rest to the stables and bring

out the working beasts. The plows are by the corral, and the first team that comes up is to be harnessed to each in turn. Then start in, and turn over a full-depth furrow a furlong from the fire."

There was no confusion, and already the hired men were busy with two great machines until Winston displaced two of them.

"How that fire passed the guards I don't know, but there will be time to find out later," he said to Dane. "Follow with the big breaker—it wants a strong man to keep that share in—as close as you can."

Then they were off, a man at the heads of the leading horses harnessed to the great machines, and Winston sitting very intent in the driving-seat of one, while the tough sod crackled under the rending shares. Both the man and the reins were needed when the smoke rolled down on them, but it was for a moment torn aside again, and there roared up towards the blurred arch of indigo a great rush of flame. The heat of it smote into prickliness the uncovered skin, and in spite of all that Winston could do, the beasts recoiled upon the machine behind them. Then they swung round wrenching the shares from the triplex furrow, and for a few wild minutes man and terrified beast fought for the mastery. Breathless half-strangled objurgations, the clatter of trace and swivel, and the thud of hoofs, rose muffled through the roar of the fire, for, while swaying, plunging, panting, they fought with fist and hoof, it was rolling on, and now the heat was almost insupportable. The victory, however, was to the men, and when the great machine went on again, Maud Barrington, who had watched the struggle with the wife of one of her neighbors, stood wide-eyed, half-afraid and yet thrilled in every fiber.

"It was splendid," she said. "They can't be beaten."

Her companion seemed to shiver a little. "Yes," she said, "perhaps it was, but I wish it was over. It would appeal to you differently, my dear, if you had a husband at one of those horses' heads."

For a moment Maud Barrington wondered whether it would, and then, when a red flame flickered out towards the team, felt a little chill of dread. In another second the smoke whirled about them, and she moved backward choking with her companion. The teams, however, went on, and came out, frantic with fear, on the farther side. The men who led them afterwards wondered how they kept their grip on the horses' heads. Then it was that while the machines swung round and other men ran to help, Winston, springing from the driving-seat, found Dane amid the swaying, plunging medley of beasts and men.

"If you can't find hook or clevis, cut the trace," he said. "It can't burn the plow, and the devils are out of hand now. The fire will jump these furrows, and we've got to try again."

In another minute four maddened beasts were careering across the prairie with portions of their trappings banging about them, while one man who was badly kicked sat down gray in face and gasping, and the fire rolled up to the ridge of loam, checked, and then sprang across it here and there.

"I'll take one of those lad's places," said Dane. "That fellow can't hold the breaker straight, Courthorne."

It was a minute or two later when he flung a breathless lad away from his plow, and the latter turned upon him hoarse with indignation.

"I raced Stapleton for it. Loose your hold, confound you. It's mine," he said.

Dane turned and laughed at him as he signed to one of the Ontario hired men to take the near horse's head.

"You're a plucky lad, and you've done what you could," he said. "Still, if you get in the way of a grown man now, I'll break your head for you."

He was off in another moment, crossed Winston, who had found fresh beasts, in his furrow, and had turned and doubled it before the fire that had passed the other barrier came close upon them. Once more the smoke grew blinding, and one of Dane's beasts went down.

"I'm out of action now," he said. "Try back. That team will never face it, Courthorne."

Winston's face showed very grim under the tossing flame. "They've got to. I'm going through," he said. "If the others are to stop it behind there, they must have time."

Then he and the husband of the woman who had spoken to Maud Barrington passed on with the frantic team into the smoke that was streaked with flame.

"Good Lord!" said Dane, and added more as sitting on the horse's head he turned his tingling face from the fire.

It was some minutes before he and the hired man who came up loosed the fallen horse, and led it and its fellow back towards the last defenses the rest had been raising, while the first furrows checked but did not stay the conflagration. There he presently came upon the man who had been with Winston.

"I don't know where Courthorne is," he said. "The beasts bolted with us just after we'd gone through the worst of it, and I fancy they took the plow along. Any way, I didn't see what became of them, and don't fancy

anybody would have worried much about them after being trampled on by a horse in the lumbar region."

Dane saw that the man was limping and white in face, and asked no more questions. It was evident to him that Courthorne would be where he was most needed, and he did what he could with those who were adding furrow to furrow across the path of the fire. It rolled up to them roaring, stopped, flung a shower of burning filaments before it, sank and swept aloft again, while the sparks rained down upon the grass before the draught it made.

Blackened men with smoldering clothes were, however, ready, and they fought each incipient blaze with soaked grain bags, and shovels, some of them also, careless of blistered arms, with their own wet jackets. As fast as each fire was trampled out another sprang into life, but the parent blaze that fed them sank and died, and at last there was a hoarse cheer. They had won, and the fire they had beaten passed on divided across the prairie, leaving the homestead unscathed between.

Then they turned to look for their leader, and did not find him until a lad came up to Dane.

"Courthorne's back by the second furrows, and I fancy he's badly hurt," he said. "He didn't appear to know me, and his head seems all kicked in."

It was not apparent how the news went round, but in a few more minutes Dane was kneeling beside a limp, blackened object stretched amid the grass, and while his comrades clustered behind her, Maud Barrington bent over him. Her voice was breathless as she asked, "You don't believe him dead?"

Somebody had brought a lantern, and Dane felt inclined to gasp when he saw the girl's white face, but what she felt was not his business then.

"He's of a kind that is very hard to kill. Hold that lantern so I can see him," he said.

The rest waited silent, glad that there was somebody to take a lead, and in a few moments Dane looked round again.

"Ride in to the settlement, Stapleton, and bring that Doctor fellow out if you bring him by the neck. Stop just a moment. You don't know where you're to bring him to."

"Here, of course," said the lad, breaking into a run.

"Wait," and Dane's voice stopped him. "Now, I don't fancy that would do. It seems to me that this is a case in which a woman to look after him would be necessary."

Then, before any of the married men or their wives who had followed them could make an offer, Maud Barrington touched his shoulder.

"He is coming to the Grange," she said.

Dane nodded, signed to Stapleton, then spoke quickly to the men about him and turned to Maud Barrington.

"Ride on at a gallop and get everything ready. I'll see he comes to no harm," he said.

The girl felt curiously grateful as she rode out with her companion, and Dane, who laid Winston carefully in a wagon, drew two of the other men aside when it rolled away towards the Grange.

"There is something to be looked into. Did you notice anything unusual about the affair?" he said.

"Since you asked me, I did," said one of the men. "I, however, scarcely cared to mention it until I had time for reflection, but while I fancy the regulation guards would have checked the fire on the boundaries without our help, I don't quite see how one started in the hollow inside them."

"Exactly," said Dane, very dryly. "Well, we have got to discover it, and the more quickly we do it the better. I fancy, however, that the question who started it is what we have to consider."

The men looked at one another, and the third of them nodded.

"I fancy it comes to that—though it is horribly unpleasant to admit it," he said.

CHAPTER XVII

MAUD BARRINGTON IS MERCILESS

DANE overtook the wagon close by the birch bluff at Silverdale Grange. It was late then, but there were lights in the windows that blinked beyond the trees, and, when the wagon stopped, Barrington stood in the entrance with one or two of his hired men. Accidents are not infrequent on the paririe, where surgical assistance is not always available, and there was a shutter ready on the ground beside him, for the Colonel had seen the field hospital in operation.

"Unhook the tailboard," he said sharply. "Two of you pick up the shutter. Four more here. Now, arms about his shoulders, hips, and knees. Lift and lower—step off with right foot, leading bearer, with your left in the rear!"

It was done in a few moments, and when the bearers passed into the big hall that rang with their shuffling steps, Maud Barrington shivered as she waited with her aunt in an inner room. That trampling was horribly suggestive, and she had seen but little of sickness and grievous wounds. Still, the fact scarcely accounted for the painful throbbing of her heart, and the dizziness that came upon her. Then the bearers came in, panting, with Barrington and Dane behind them, and the girl was grateful to her aunt, who laid a hand upon her arm when she saw the singed head, and blackened face that was smeared with a ruddier tint, upon the shutter.

"Lower!" said Colonel Barrington. "Lift, as I told you," and the huddled object was laid upon the bed. Then there was silence until the impassive voice rose again.

"We shall not want you, Maud. Dane, you and I will get these burnt things off him."

The girl went out, and while she stood, feeling curiously chilly in an adjoining room, Barrington bent over his patient.

"Well put together!" he said thoughtfully. "Most of his people were lighter in the frame. Well, we can only oil the burns, and get a cold compress about his head. All intact, so far as I can see, and I fancy he'd pull through a good deal more than has happened to him. I am obliged for your assistance, but I need not keep you."

The men withdrew, and when a rattle of wheels rose from the prairie, Maud Barrington waylaid her uncle in the hall. Her fingers were trembling, and, though her voice was steady, the man glanced at her curiously as she asked, "How is he?"

"One can scarcely form an opinion yet," he said slowly. "He is burned here and there, and his head is badly cut, but it is the concussion that troubles me. A frantic horse kicks tolerably hard you know, but I shall be able to tell you more when the doctor comes to-morrow. In the meanwhile you had better rest, though you could look in and see if your aunt wants anything in an hour or two."

Maud Barrington passed an hour in horrible impatience, and then stole quietly into the sick-room. The windows were open wide, and the shaded lamp burned unsteadily as the cool night breeze flowed in. Its dim light just touched the man who lay motionless with a

bandage round his head, and the drawn pallor of his face once more sent a shiver through the girl. Then Miss Barrington rose and lifted a warning hand.

"Quite unconscious still," she said softly. "I fancy he was knocked down by one of the horses and trampled on, but your uncle has hopes of him. He has evidently led a healthy life."

The girl was a little less serene than usual then, and drew back into the shadow.

"Yes," she said. "We did not think so once."

Miss Barrington smiled curiously. "Are you very much astonished, Maud? Still, there is nothing you can do for me, and we shall want you to-morrow."

Realizing that there was no need for her, the girl went out, and when the door closed behind her the little white-haired lady bent down and gazed at her patient long and steadily. Then she shook her head, and moved back to the seat she had risen from with perplexity in her face.

In the meanwhile, Maud Barrington sat by the open window in her room staring out into the night. There was a whispering in the birch bluff, and the murmuring of leagues of grasses rose from the prairie that stretched away beyond it. Still, though the wind fanned her throbbing forehead with a pleasant coolness, the nocturnal harmonies awoke no response in her. Sleep was out of the question, for her brain was in a whirl of vague sensations, through which fear came uppermost every now and then. Why anything which could befall this man who had come out of the obscurity, and was, he had told her, to go back into it again, should disturb her, Maud Barrington did not know; but there was no disguising the fact that she would feel his loss grievously, as others at Silverdale would do. Then with a little

tremor she wondered whether they must lose him, and rising stood tensely still, listening for any sound from the room where the sick man lay.

There was nothing but the sighing of the grasses outside and the murmur of the birches in the bluff, until the doleful howl of a coyote stole faintly out of the night. Again the beast sent its cry out upon the wind, and the girl trembled as she listened. The unearthly wail seemed charged with augury, and every nerve in her thrilled.

Then she sank down into her chair again, and sat still, hoping, listening, fearing, and wondering when the day would come, until at last her eyes grew heavy, and it was with a start she roused herself when a rattle of wheels came up out of the prairie in the early morning. Then a spume-flecked team swept up to the house, a door swung open, there was a murmur of voices and a sound of feet that moved softly in the hall, after which, for what seemed an interminable time, silence reigned again. At last, when the stealthy patter of feet recommenced, the girl slipped down the stairway and came upon Barrington. Still, she could not ask the question that was trembling on her lips.

"Is there anything I can do?" she said.

Barrington shook his head. "Not now! The doctor is here, and does not seem very anxious about him. The concussion is not apparently serious, and his other injuries will not trouble him much."

Maud Barrington said nothing and turned away, sensible of a great relief, while her aunt entering her room an hour later found her lying fast asleep, but still dressed as she had last seen her. Then, being a discerning woman, she went out softly with a curious smile, and did not at any time mention what she had seen.

It was that evening, and Barrington had departed suddenly on business to Winnipeg, when Dane rode up to the Grange. He asked for Miss Barrington and her niece, and when he heard that his comrade was recovering sensibility, sat down looking very grave.

"I have something to tell you, but Courthorne must not know until he is better, while I'm not sure that we need tell him then," he said. "In the meanwhile, I am also inclined to fancy it would be better kept from Colonel Barrington on his return. It is the first time anything of the kind has happened at Silverdale, and it would hurt him horribly, which decided us to come first to you."

"You must be more concise," said Miss Barrington quietly, and Dane trifled with the hat in his hand.

"It is," he said, "a most unpleasant thing, and is known to three men only, of whom I am one. We have also arranged that nobody else will chance upon what we have discovered. You see, Ferris is unfortunately connected with you, and his people have had trouble enough already."

"Ferris?" said Maud Barrington, with a sudden hardening of her face. "You surely don't mean——"

Dane nodded. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "I'm afraid I do. Now, if you will listen to me for a minute or two."

He told his story with a grim, convincing quietness, and the blood crept into the girl's cheeks as she followed his discoveries step by step. Glancing at her aunt, she saw that there was horror as well as belief in the gentle lady's face.

"Then," she said, with cold incisiveness, "Ferris cannot stay here, and he shall be punished."

"No," said Dane. "We have no room for a lad of

his disposition at Silverdale—but I'm very uncertain in regard to the rest. You see, it couldn't be done without attracting attention—and I have the honor of knowing his mother. You will remember how she lost another son. That is why I did not tell Colonel Barrington. He is a trifle—precipitate—occasionally."

Miss Barrington glanced at him gratefully. "You have done wisely," she said. "Ethel Ferris has borne enough, and she has never been the same since the horrible night they brought Frank home, for she knew how he came by his death, though the coroner brought it in misadventure. I also fancy my brother would be implacable in a case like this, though how far I am warranted in keeping the facts from him I do not know."

Dane nodded gravely. "We leave that to you. You will, however, remember what happened once before. We cannot go through what we did then again."

Miss Barrington recalled the formal court-martial that had once been held in the hall of the Grange, when every man in the settlement had been summoned to attend, for there were offenses in regard to which her brother was inflexible. When it was over and the disgraced man went forth an outcast, a full account of the proceedings had been forwarded to those at home who had hoped for much from him.

"No," she said. "For the sake of the woman who sent him here we must stop short of that."

Then Maud Barrington looked at them both. "There is one person you do not seem to consider at all, and that is the man who lies here in peril through Ferris's fault," she said. "Is there nothing due to him?"

Dane noticed the sternness in her eyes, and glanced as if for support towards Miss Barrington. "I fancy

he would be the last to claim it if he knew what we do. Still, in the meanwhile, I leave the affair to your aunt and you. We would like to have your views before doing anything further."

He rose as he spoke, and when he had gone out, Maud Barrington sat down at a writing-table. "Aunt," she said quietly, "I will ask Ferris to come here at once."

It was next day when Ferris came, evidently ill at ease, though he greeted Miss Barrington with elaborate courtesy, and would have done the same with her niece, but the girl turned from him with visible disdain.

"Sit down," she said coldly. "Colonel Barrington is away, but his sister will take his place, and after him I have the largest stake in the welfare of Silverdale. Now, a story has come to our ears which if it had not been substantiated would have appeared incredible. Shall Miss Barrington tell it you?"

Ferris, who was a very young man, flushed, but the color faded and left his cheeks a trifle gray. He was not a very prepossessing lad, for it requires a better physique than he was endowed with to bear the stamp of viciousness that is usually most noticeable on the feeble, but he was distinguished by a trace of arrogance that not infrequently served him as well as resolution.

"If it would not inconvenience Miss Barrington, it would help me to understand a good deal I can find no meaning for now," he said.

The elder lady's face grew sterner, and very quietly but remorselessly she set forth his offense, until no one who heard the tale could have doubted the origin of the fire.

"I should have been better pleased, had you, if only when you saw we knew everything, appeared willing to confess your fault and make amends," she said.

Ferris laughed as ironically as he dared under the eyes which had lost their gentleness. "You will pardon me for telling you that I have no intention of admitting it now. That you should be so readily prejudiced against me is not gratifying, but, you see, nobody could take any steps without positive proof of the story, and my word is at least as credible as that of the interloper who told it you."

Maud Barrington raised her head suddenly, and looked at him with a curious light in her eyes, but the elder lady made a little gesture of deprecation.

"Mr. Courthorne has told us nothing," she said. "Still, three gentlemen whose worth is known at Silverdale are willing to certify every point of it. If we lay the affair before Colonel Barrington, you will have an opportunity of standing face to face with them."

The lad's assurance, which, so far and no further, did duty for courage, deserted him. He was evidently not prepared to be made the subject of another court-martial, and the hand he laid on the table in front of him trembled a little.

"Madam," he said hoarsely, "if I admit everything what will you do?"

"Nothing," said Maud Barrington coldly. "On condition that within a month you leave Silverdale."

Ferris stared at her. "You can't mean that. You see, I'm fond of farming, and nobody would give me what the place cost me. I couldn't live among the outside settler fellows."

The girl smiled coldly. "I mean exactly what you heard, and, if you do not enlighten them, the settlers would probably not object to you. Your farm will be taken over at what you gave for it."

Ferris stood up. "I am going to make a last appeal.

Silverdale's the only place fit for a gentleman to live in in Canada, and I want to stay here. You don't know what it would cost me to go away, and I'd do anything for reparation—send a big check to a Winnipeg hospital and starve myself to make up for it if that would content you. Only, don't send me away."

His tone grew almost abject as he proceeded, and while Miss Barrington's eyes softened, her niece's heart grew harder because of it, as she remembered that he had brought a strong man down.

"No," she said dryly. "That would punish your mother and sisters from whom you would cajole the money. You can decide between leaving Silverdale, and having the story, and the proof of it, put into the hands of Colonel Barrington."

She sat near an open window regarding him with quiet scorn, and the light that shone upon her struck a sparkle from her hair and set the rounded cheek and neck gleaming like ivory. The severity of her pose became her, and the lad's callow desire that had driven him to his ruin stirred him to impotent rage in his desperation. There were gray patches in his cheeks, and his voice was strained and hoarse.

"You have no mercy on me because I struck at him," he said. "The one thing I shall always be sorry for is that I failed, and I would go away with pleasure if the horse had trampled the life out of him. Well, there was a time when you could have made what you wished of me, and now, at least, I shall not see the blackleg you have showered your favors on drag you down to the mire he came from."

Maud Barrington's face had grown very colorless, but she said nothing, and her aunt rose and raised the hammer of a gong.

"Ferris," she said. "Do you wish to be led out by the hired men?"

The lad laughed, and the hideous merriment set the white-haired lady's nerves on edge. "Oh, I am going now, but, for once, let us be honest. It was for her I did it, and if it had been any other man I had injured, she would have forgiven me."

Then with an ironical farewell he swung out of the room, and the two women exchanged glances when the door closed noisily behind him. Miss Barrington was flushed with anger, but her niece's face was paler than usual.

"Are there men like him?" she said.

Miss Barrington shook off her anger, and rising, laid a gentle hand on her niece's shoulder. "Very few, I hope," she said. "Still, it would be better if we sent word to Dane. You would not care for that tale to spread?"

For a moment the girl's cheeks flamed, then she rose quietly and crossed the room.

"No," she said, and her aunt stood still, apparently lost in contemplation, after the door swung softly to. Then she sat down at the writing table. There was very little in the note, but an hour after Dane received it that night, a wagon drew up outside Ferris's farm. Two men went quietly in and found the owner of the homestead sitting with a sheaf of papers scattered about the table in front of him.

"Come back to-morrow. I can't be worried now," he said. "Well, why the devil don't you go?"

Dane laid a hand on his shoulder. "We are waiting for you. You are coming with us!"

Ferris turned, and stared at them. "Where to?"

"To the railroad," Dane said dryly. "After that

you can go just where it pleases you. Now, there's no use, whatever, making a fuss, and every care will be taken of your property until you can arrange to dispose of it. Hadn't you better get ready?"

The grim quietness of the voice was sufficient, and Ferris, who saw that force would be used if it was necessary, decided that it was scarcely likely his hired men would support him.

"I might have expected it!" he said. "Of course, it was imprudent to speak the truth to our leader's niece. You know what I have done?"

"I know what you did the night Courthorne nearly lost his life," said Dane. "One would have fancied that would have contented you."

"Well," said Ferris, "if you would like to hear of a more serious offense, I'll oblige you."

Dane's finger closed on his arm. "If you attempt to tell me, I'll break your head for you."

Next moment Ferris was lifted from his chair, and in less than ten minutes Dane thrust him into the wagon, where another man, who passed a hand through his arm, sat beside him. It was a very long drive to the railroad, but few words were exchanged during it, and when they reached the settlement one of Ferris's companions mounted guard outside the hotel he found accommodation in, until the Montreal express crawled up above the rim of the prairie. Then both went with him to the station, and as the long cars rolled in Dane turned quietly to the lad.

"Now, I am quite aware that we are incurring some responsibility, so you need not waste your breath," he said. "There are, however, lawyers in Winnipeg, if you fancy it is advisable to make use of them, and you

know where I and Macdonald are, if you want us. In the meanwhile, your farm will be run better than ever it was in your hands, until you dispose of it. That is all I have to tell you, except that if any undesirable version of the affair gets about, Courthorne or I will assuredly find you."

Then there was a scream of the whistle, and the train rolled away with Ferris standing white with fury on the platform of a car.

In the meanwhile Maud Barrington spent a sleepless night. Ferris's taunt had reached its mark, and she realized with confusion that it was the truth he spoke. The fact that brought the blood to her cheeks would no longer be hidden, and she knew it was a longing to punish the lad who had struck down the man she loved that had led to her insistence on the former leaving Silverdale. It was a difficult admission, but she made it that night. The outcast who had stepped out of the obscurity, and into her peaceful life, had shown himself a man that any woman might be proud to mate with, and, though he had said very little, and now and then his words were bitter, she knew that he loved her. Whatever he had done, and she felt against all the teachings of her reason that it had not been evil, he had shown himself the equal of the best at Silverdale, and she laughed as she wondered which of the men there she could set in the balance against him. Then she shivered a little, remembering that there was a barrier whose extent he alone realized between them, and wondered vaguely what the future would bring.

It was a week or two before Winston was on his feet again, and Maud Barrington was one of the first to greet him when he walked feebly into the hall. She

had, however, decided on the line of conduct that would be most fitting, and there was no hint of more than neighborly kindliness in her tone. They had spoken about various trifles when Winston turned to her.

"You and Miss Barrington have taken such good care of me that if I consulted my inclinations I would linger in convalescence a long while," he said. "Still, I must make an effort to get away to-morrow."

"We cannot take the responsibility of letting you go under a week yet," said Maud Barrington. "Have you anything especially important to do?"

"Yes," said Winston, and the girl understood the grimness of his face. "I have."

"It concerns the fire?"

Winston looked at her curiously. "I would sooner you did not ask me that question, Miss Barrington."

"I scarcely fancy it is necessary," said the girl, with a little smile. "Still, I have something to tell you, and a favor to ask. Ferris has left Silverdale, and you must never make any attempt to discover what caused the fire."

"You know?"

"Yes," said Maud Barrington. "Dane, Macdonald, and Hassal know, too, but you will not ask them, and if you did they would not tell you."

"I can refuse you nothing," said Winston with a laugh, though his voice betrayed him. "Still, I want a *quid pro quo*. Wait until Ferris's farm is in the sale list and then take it with the growing crop."

"I could not. There are reasons," said the girl.

Winston gazed at her steadily, and a little color crept to his forehead, but he answered unconcernedly, "They can be over-ridden. It may be the last favor I shall ever ask of you."

"No," said Maud Barrington. "Anything else you wish, but not that. You must believe, without wondering why, that it is out of the question!"

Winston yielded with a curious little smile. "Well," he said, "we will let it drop. I ask no questions. You have accepted so much already without understanding it."

CHAPTER XVIII

WITH THE STREAM

IT was Winston's last afternoon at the Grange, and almost unpleasantly hot, while the man whose vigor had not as yet returned to him was content to lounge in the big window-seat listlessly watching his companion. He had borne the strain of effort long, and the time of his convalescence amid the tranquillity of Silverdale Grange had with the gracious kindliness of Miss Barrington and her niece been a revelation to him. There were moments when it brought him bitterness and self-reproach, but these were usually brief, and he made the most of what he knew might never be his again, telling himself that it would at least be something to look back upon.

Maud Barrington sat close by, glancing through the letters a mounted man had brought in, and the fact that his presence put no restraint on her curiously pleased the man. At last, however, she opened a paper and passed it across to him.

"You have been very patient, but no doubt you will find something that will atone for my silence there," she said.

Winston turned over the journal, and then smiled at her. "Is there anything of moment in your letters?"

"No," said the girl, with a little laugh. "I scarcely think there is—a garden party, a big reception, the visit of a high official, and a description of the latest hat. Still, you know, that is supposed to be enough for us."

"Then I wonder whether you will find this more

interesting: 'The bears made a determined rally yesterday, and wheat moved back again. There was later in the day a rush to sell, and prices now stand at almost two cents below their lowest level.'"

"Yes," said Maud Barrington, noticing the sudden intentness of his pallid face. "I do. It is serious news for you?"

"And for you! You see where I have led you. Ill or well, I must start for Winnipeg to-morrow."

Maud Barrington smiled curiously. "You and I and a handful of others stand alone, but I told you I would not blame you whether we won or lost. Do you know that I am grateful for the glimpses of the realities of life that you have given me?"

Winston felt his pulses throb faster, for the girl's unabated confidence stirred him, but he looked at her gravely. "I wonder if you realize what you have given me in return? Life as I had seen it was very grim and bare—and now I know what, with a little help, it is possible to make of it."

"With a little help?" said Maud Barrington.

Winston nodded, and his face which had grown almost wistful hardened. "Those who strive in the pit are apt to grow blind to the best—the sweetness and order, and all the little graces that mean so much. Even if their eyes are opened, it is usually too late. You see, they lose touch with all that lies beyond the struggle, and without some one to lead them they cannot get back to it. Still, if I talk in this fashion you will laugh at me, but every one has his weakness now and then—and no doubt I shall make up for it at Winnipeg to-morrow. One can not afford to be fanciful when wheat is two cents down."

Maud Barrington was not astonished. Tireless in

his activities and, more curious still, almost ascetic in his mode of life, the man had already given her glimpses of his inner self and the vague longings that came upon him. He never asked her pity, but she found something pathetic in his attitude, for it seemed he knew that the stress and the turmoil alone could be his. Why this was so she did not know, but it was with a confidence that could not be shaken now she felt it was through no fault of his. His last words, however, showed her that the mask was on again.

"I scarcely fancy you are well enough, but if you must go, I wonder whether you would do a good turn to Alfreton?" she said. "The lad has been speculating —and he seems anxious lately."

"It is natural that they should all bring their troubles to you."

Maud Barrington laughed. "I, however, generally pass them on to you."

A trace of color crept into the man's face, and his voice was a trifle hoarse as he said, "Do you know that I would ask nothing better than to take every care you had, and bear it for you?"

"Still," said the girl, with a little smile, "that is very evidently out of the question."

Winston rose, and she saw that one hand was closed as he looked down upon her. Then he turned and stared out at the prairie, but there was something very significant in the rigidity of his attitude, and his face seemed to have grown suddenly careworn when he glanced back at her.

"Of course," he said quietly. "You see, I have been ill, and a little off my balance lately. That accounts for erratic speeches, though I meant it all. Colonel Barrington is still in Winnipeg?"

"Yes," said the girl, who was not convinced by the explanation, very quietly. "I am a little anxious about him, too. He sold wheat forward, and I gather from his last letter has not bought it yet. Now, as Alfreton is driving in to-morrow, he could take you."

Winston was grateful to her, and still more to Miss Barrington, who came in just then, while he did not see the girl again before he departed with Alfreton on the morrow. When they had left Silverdale a league behind, the trail dipped steeply amid straggling birches to a bridge which spanned the creek in a hollow, and Winston glanced up at the winding ascent thoughtfully.

"It has struck me that going round by this place puts another six miles on to your journey to the railroad, and a double team could not pull a big load up," he said.

The lad nodded. "The creek is a condemned nuisance. We have either to load light when we are hauling grain in, and then pitch half the bags off at the bottom and come back for them—while you know one man can't put up many four-bushel bags—or keep a man and horses at the ravine until we're through."

Winston laughed. "Now, I wonder whether you ever figured how much those little things put up the price of your wheat."

"This is the only practicable way down," said the lad. "You could scarcely climb up one side where the ravine's narrow abreast of Silverdale."

"Drive round. I want to see it," said Winston. "Call at Rushforth's for a spool of binder twine."

Half an hour later Alfreton pulled the wagon up amid the birches on the edge of the ravine, which just there sloped steep as a railway cutting, and not very

much broader, to the creek. Winston gazed at it, and then handed the twine to the hired man.

"Take that with you, Charley, and get down," he said. "If you strip your boots off you can wade through the creek."

"I don't know that I want to," said the man.

"Well," said Winston, "it would please me if you did, as well as cool your feet. Then you could climb up, and hold that twine down on the other side."

The man grinned, and, though Alfreton remembered that he was not usually so tractable with him, proceeded to do Winston's bidding. When he came back there was a twinkle of comprehension in his eyes, and Winston, who cut off the length of twine, smiled at Alfreton.

"It is," he said dryly, "only a little idea of mine."

They drove on, and reaching Winnipeg next day, went straight to Graham the wheat-broker's offices. He kept them waiting some time, and in the meanwhile men with intent faces passed hastily in and out through the outer office. Some of them had telegrams or bundles of papers in their hands, and the eyes of all were eager. The corridor rang with footsteps, the murmur of voices seemed to vibrate through the great building, while it seemed to Alfreton there was a suggestion of strain and expectancy in all he heard and saw. Winston, however, sat gravely still, though the lad noticed that his eyes were keener than usual, for the muffled roar of the city, patter of messengers' feet, ceaseless tinkle of telephone call bells, and whir of the elevators, each packed with human freight, all stirred him. Hitherto he had grappled with nature, but now he was to test his judgment against the keenest wits of the cities, and stand or fall by it, in the struggle that was to be waged over the older nations' food.

At last, however, a clerk signed to them from a doorway, and they found Graham sitting before a littered table. A man sat opposite him with the telephone receiver in his hand.

"Sorry to keep you, but I've both hands full just now. Every man in this city is thinking wheat," he said. "Has he word from Chicago, Thomson?"

"Yes," said the clerk. "Bears lost hold this morning. General buying!"

Just then the door swung open and a breathless man came in. "Guess I scared that clerk of yours who wanted to turn me off," he said. "Heard what Chicago's doing? Well, you've got to buy for me now. They're going to send her right up into the sky, and it's 'bout time I got out before the bulls trample the life out of me."

"Quite sure you can't wait until to-morrow?" asked Graham.

The man shook his head. "No, sir. When I've been selling all along the line! Send off right away, and tell your man on the market to cover every blame sale for me."

Graham signed to the clerk, and as the telephone bell tinkled a lad brought in a message. The broker opened it. "New York lost advance and recovered it twice in the first hour," he read. "At present a point or two better. Steady buying in Liverpool."

"That," said the other man, "is quite enough for me. Let me have the contracts as soon as they're ready."

He went out, and Graham turned to Winston. "There's half-a-dozen more of them outside," he said. "Do you buy or sell?"

Winston laughed. "I want to know which a wise man would do."

"Well," said Graham, "I can't tell you. The bulls rushed wheat up as I wired you, but the other folks got their claws in and worried it down again. Wheat's anywhere and nowhere all the time, and I'm advising nobody just now. No doubt you've formed your own opinion."

Winston nodded. "It's the last of the grapple, and the bears aren't quite beaten yet, but any time the next week or two the decisive turn will come. Then, if they haven't got out, there'll be very little left of them."

"You seem tolerably sure of the thing. Got plenty of confidence in the bulls?"

Winston smiled. "I fancy I know how Western wheat was sown this year better than any statistician of the ring, and it's not the bulls I'm counting on, but those millions of hungry folks in the old country. It's not New York or Chicago, but Liverpool the spark is coming from."

"Well," said Graham, "that's my notion, too, but I've no time for anybody who hasn't grist for me just now. Still, I'd be glad to come round and take you home to supper if you haven't the prejudice, which is not unknown at Silverdale, against eating with a man who makes his dollars on the market and didn't get them given him."

Winston laughed, and held up a lean brown hand. "All I ever had until less than a year ago, I earned with that. I'll be ready for you."

He went out with Alfreton, and noticed that the lad ate little at lunch. When the meal was over, he glanced at him with a smile through the cigar smoke.

"I think it would do you good to take me into your confidence," he said.

"Well," said Alfreton, "it would be a relief to talk, and I feel I could trust you. Still, it's only fair to tell you I didn't at the beginning. I was an opinionated ass, you see."

Winston laughed. "I don't mind in the least, and we have most of us felt that way."

"Well," said the lad, "I was a little short of funds, and proud of myself, and when everybody seemed certain that wheat was going down forever, I thought I saw my chance of making a little. Now I've more wheat than I care to think of to deliver, the market's against me. If it stiffens any further, it will break me; and that's not all, you see. Things have gone tolerably badly with the folks at home, and I fancy it took a good deal of what should have been the girls' portion to start me at Silverdale."

"Then," said Winston, "it's no use trying to show you how foolish you've been. That is the usual thing, and it's easy; but what the man in the hole wants to know is the means of getting out again."

Alfreton smiled ruefully. "I'm tolerably far in. I could just cover at to-day's prices if I pledged my crop, but it would leave me nothing to go on with, and the next advance would swamp the farm."

"Well," said Winston quietly, "don't buy to-day. There's going to be an advance that will take folks' breath away, but the time's not quite ripe yet. You'll see prices knocked back a little the next day or two, and then you will cover your sales to the last bushel."

"But are you sure?" asked the lad, a trifle hoarsely. "You see, if you're mistaken, it will mean ruin to me."

Winston laid his hand on his shoulder. "If I am wrong, I'll make your losses good."

Nothing more was said on that subject, but Alfreton's

face grew anxious once more as they went up and down the city. Everybody was talking wheat, which was not astonishing, for that city, and the two great provinces to the west of it, lived by the trade in grain, and before the afternoon had passed they learned that there had been a persistent advance. The lad's uneasiness showed itself, but when they went back to the hotel about the supper hour Winston smiled at him.

"You're feeling sick?" he said. "Still, I don't fancy you need worry."

Then Graham appeared and claimed him, and it was next morning when he saw Alfreton again. He was breakfasting with Colonel Barrington and Dane, and Winston noticed that the older man did not appear to have much appetite. When the meal was finished he drew him aside.

"You have covered your sales, sir?" he asked.

"No, sir," said Barrington. "I have not."

"Then I wonder whether it would be presumption if I asked you a question?"

Barrington looked at him steadily. "To be frank, I fancy it would be better if you did not. I have, of course, only my own folly to blame for believing I could equal your natural aptitude for this risky amusement which I had, and still have, objections to. I was, however, in need of money, and seeing your success, yielded to the temptation. I am not laying any of the responsibility on you, but am not inclined to listen to more of your suggestions."

Winston met his gaze without embarrassment. "I am sorry you have been unfortunate, sir."

Just then Dane joined them. "I sat up late last night in the hope of seeing you," he said. "Now, I don't know what to make of the market, but there were

one or two fellows who would have bought my estimated crop from me at a figure which would have about covered working expenses. Some of the others who did not know you were coming in, put their affairs in my hands too."

"Sell nothing," said Winston quietly.

It was an hour later when a messenger from Graham found them in the smoking-room, and Colonel Barrington smiled dryly as he tore up the envelope handed him.

"'Market opened with sellers prevailing. Chicago flat!'" he read.

Dane glanced at Winston somewhat ruefully, but the latter's eyes were fixed on Colonel Barrington.

"If I had anything to cover I should still wait," he said.

"That," said Dane, "is not exactly good news to me."

"Our turn will come," said Winston gravely.

That day, and during several which followed it, wheat moved down, and Dane said nothing to Winston about what he felt, though his face grew grimmer as the time went on. Barrington was quietly impassive when they met him, while Alfreton, who saw a way out of his difficulties, was hard to restrain. Winston long afterwards remembered that horrible suspense, but he showed no sign of what he was enduring then, and was only a trifle quieter than usual when he and Alfreton entered Graham's office one morning. It was busier than ever, while the men who hastened in and out seemed to reveal by attitude and voice that they felt something was going to happen.

"In sellers' favor!" said the broker. "Everybody with a few dollars is hammering prices one way or the

other. Nothing but wheat to be heard of in this city. Well, we'll simmer down when the turn comes, and though I'm piling up dollars, I'll be thankful. Hallo, Thomson, anything going on now?"

"Chicago buying," said the clerk. "Now it's Liverpool! Sellers holding off. Wanting a two-eighths more the cental."

The telephone bell tinkled again, and there was a trace of excitement in the face of the man who answered it. "Walthew has got news ahead of us," he said. "Chicago bears caved in. Buying orders from Liverpool broke them. Got it there strong."

Winston tapped Alfreton's shoulder. "Now is the time. Tell him to buy," he said. "We'll wait outside until you've put this deal through, Graham."

It was twenty minutes before Graham came out to them. "I'll let you have your contracts, Mr. Alfreton, and my man on the market just fixed them in time," he said. "They're up a penny on the cental in Liverpool now, and nobody will sell, while here in Winnipeg they're falling over each other to buy. Never had such a circus since the trade began."

Alfreton, who seemed to quiver, turned to his companion, and then forgot what he had to tell him. Winston had straightened himself, and his eyes were shining, while the lad was puzzled by his face. Still, save for the little tremor in it his voice was very quiet.

"It has come at last," he said. "Two farms would not have covered your losses, Alfreton, if you had waited until to-morrow. Have supper with us, Graham—if you like it, lakes of champagne."

"I want my head, but I'll come," said Graham, with a curious smile. "I don't know that it wouldn't pay me to hire yours just now."

Then Winston turned suddenly, and running down the stairway shook the man awaiting him by the arm.

"The flood's with us now," he said. "Find Colonel Barrington, and make him cover everything before he's ruined. Dane, you and I, and a few others, will see the dollars rolling into Silverdale."

Dane found Barrington, who listened with a grim smile to what he had to tell him.

"The words are yours, Dane, but that is all," he said. "Wheat will go down again, and I do not know that I am grateful to Courthorne."

Dane dare urge nothing further, and spent the rest of that day wandering up and down the city, in a state of blissful content, with Alfreton and Winston. One of them had turned his losses into a small profit, and the other two, who had, hoping almost against hope, sown when others had feared to plow, saw that the harvest would repay them beyond their wildest expectations. They heard nothing but predictions of higher prices everywhere, and the busy city seemed to throb with exultation. The turn had come, and there was hope for the vast wheat lands it throve upon.

Graham had much to tell them when they sat down to the somewhat elaborate meal Winston termed supper that night, and he nodded approvingly when Dane held out his glass of champagne and touched his comrade's.

"I'm not fond of speeches, Courthorne, and I fancy our tastes are the same," he said. "Still, I can't let this great night pass without greeting you as the man who has saved not a few of us at Silverdale. We were in a very tight place before you came, and we are with you when you want us from this time, soul and body, and all our possessions."

Alfreton's eyes glistened, and his hand shook a little as he touched the rim of Winston's goblet.

"There are folks in the old country who will bless you when they know," he said. "You'll forget it, though I can't, that I was once against you."

Winston nodded to them gravely, and, when the glasses were empty, shook hands with the three.

"We have put up a good fight, and I think we shall win, but, while you will understand me better by and by, what you have offered me almost hurts," he said.

"What we have given is yours. We don't take it back," said Dane.

Winston smiled, though there was a wistfulness in his eyes as he saw the faint bewilderment in his companions' faces.

"Well," he said slowly, "you can do a little for me now. Colonel Barrington was right when he set his face against speculation, and it was only because I saw dollars were badly needed at Silverdale, and the one means of getting them, I made my deal. Still, if we are to succeed as farmers we must market our wheat as cheaply as our rivals, and we want a new bridge on the level. Now, I got a drawing of one, and estimates for British Columbia stringers, yesterday, while the birches in the ravine will give us what else we want. I'll build the bridge myself, but it will cheapen the wheat-hauling to everybody, and you might like to help me."

Dane glanced at the drawing laid before him, but Alfreton spoke first. "One hundred dollars. I'm only a small man, but I wish it was five," he said.

"I'll make it that much, and see the others do their share," said Dane, and then glanced at the broker with a curious smile.

"How does he do it—this and other things? He was never a business man!"

Graham nodded. "He can't help it. It was born in him. You and I can figure and plan, but Courthorne is different—the right thing comes to him. I knew the first night I saw him, you had got the man you wanted at Silverdale."

Then Winston stood up wineglass in hand. "I am obliged to you, but I fancy this has gone far enough," he said. "There is one man who has done more for you than I could ever do. Prosperity is a good thing, but you, at least, know what he has aimed at stands high above that. May you have the Head of the Silverdale community long with you!"

CHAPTER XIX

UNDER TEST

THE prairie lay dim and shadowy in the creeping dusk when Winston sat on a redwood stringer near the head of his partly-finished bridge. There was no sound from the hollow behind him but the faint gurgle of the creek, and the almost imperceptible vibration of countless minute wings. The birches which climbed the slope to it wound away sinuously, a black wall on either hand, and the prairie lying gray and still stretched back into the silence in front of him. Here and there a smoldering fire showed dully red on the brink of the ravine, but the tired men who had lighted them were already wrapped in heavy slumber.

The prairie hay was gathered, harvest had not come, and for the last few weeks Winston, with his hired men from the bush of Ontario, had toiled at the bridge with a tireless persistency which had somewhat astonished the gentlemen farmers of Silverdale. They, however, rode over every now and then, and most cheerfully rendered what assistance they could, until it was time to return for tennis or a shooting sweepstake, and Winston thanked them gravely, even when he and his Ontario axmen found it necessary to do the work again. He could have told nobody why he had undertaken to build the bridge, which could be of no use to him, but he was in a measure prompted by instincts born in him, for he was one of the Englishmen who, with a dim recognition of the primeval charge to subdue the earth and render it fruit-

ful, gravitate to the newer lands, and usually leave their mark upon them. He had also a half-defined notion that it would be something he could leave behind in reparation, that the men of Silverdale might remember more leniently the stranger who had imposed on them while in the strain of the mental struggle strenuous occupation was a necessity to him.

A bundle of papers it was now too dim to see lay beside him clammy with the dew, and he sat bare-headed, a pipe which had gone out in his hand, staring across the prairie with an ironical smile in his eyes. He had planned boldly and striven tirelessly, and now the fee he could not take would surely be tendered him. Wheat was growing dearer every day, and such crops as he had sown had not been seen at Silverdale. Still, the man, who had had few compunctions before he met Maud Barrington, knew now that in a little while he must leave all he had painfully achieved behind. What he would do then he did not know, for only one fact seemed certain—in another four months, or less, he would have turned his back on Silverdale.

Presently, however, the sound of horse-hoofs caught his ears, and he stood up when a mounted figure rose out of the prairie. The moon had just swung up, round and coppery, from behind a rise, and when horse and rider cut black and sharp against it his pulses throbbed faster and a little flush crept into his face, for he knew every line of the figure in the saddle. Some minutes had passed when Maud Barrington rode slowly to the head of the bridge, and pulled up her horse at the sight of him.

The moon turning silver now shone behind her head, and a tress of hair sparkled beneath her wide hat, while the man had a glimpse of the gleaming whiteness of rounded cheek and neck. Her face he could not see,

but shapely shoulders, curve of waist, and sweeping line of the light habit were forced up as in a daguerreotype, and as the girl sat still looking down on him, slender, lissom, dainty, etherealized almost by the brightening radiance, she seemed to him a visionary complement of the harmonies of the night. It also appeared wiser to think of her as such than a being of flesh and blood whom he had wildly ventured to long for, and he almost regretted when her first words dispelled the illusion.

"It is dreadfully late," she said. "Pluto went very lame soon after I left Macdonald's, and I knew if I went back for another horse he would have insisted on riding home with me. I had slipped away while he was in the granary. One can cross the bridge?"

"Not mounted!" said Winston. "There are only a few planks between the stringers here and there, but, if you don't mind waiting, I can lead your horse across."

He smiled a little, for the words seemed trivial and out of place in face of the effect the girl's appearance had on him, but she glanced at him questioningly.

"No!" she said. "Now, I would have gone round by the old bridge, only that Allardyce told me you let him ride across this afternoon."

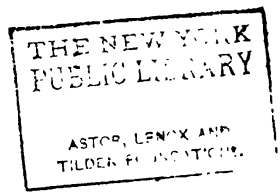
"Still," and the man stopped a moment, "it was daylight then, you see."

Maud Barrington laughed a little, for his face was visible and she understood the slowness of his answer. "Is that all? It is moonlight now."

"No," said Winston dryly, "but one is apt to make an explanation too complete occasionally. Will you let me help you down?"

Maud Barrington held out her hands, and when he swung her down watched him tramp away with the horse, with a curious smile. A light compliment seldom

MAUD BARRINGTON LAUGHED A LITTLE.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afforded her much pleasure, but the man's grim reserve had now and then piqued more than her curiosity, though she was sensible that the efforts she occasionally made to uncover what lay behind it were not without their risk. Then he came back, and turned to her very gravely.

"Let me have your hand," he said.

Maud Barrington gave it to him, and hoped the curious little thrill that ran through her when his hard fingers closed upon her palm did not communicate itself to him. She also noticed that he moved his head sharply a moment, and then looked straight in front again. Then the birches seemed to fall away beneath them, and they moved out across the dim gully with the loosely-laid planking rattling under their feet, until they came to a strip scarcely three feet wide which spanned a gulf of blackness in the shadow of the trees.

"Hold fast!" said Winston, with a trace of hoarseness. "You are sure you feel quite steady?"

"Of course!" said the girl, with a little laugh, though she recognized the anxiety in his voice, and felt his hand close almost cruelly on her own. She was by no means timorous, and still less fanciful, but when they moved out into the blackness that closed about them above and beneath along the slender strip of swaying timber she was glad of the masterful grip. It seemed in some strange fashion portentous, for she felt that she would once more be willing to brave unseen perils, secure only in his guidance. What he felt she did not know, and was sensible of an almost overwhelming curiosity, until when at last well-stiffened timber lay beneath them, she contrived to drop a glove just where the moonlight smote the bridge. Winston stooped, and his face was clear in the silvery light when he rose again. Maud Barrington saw the relief in it, and compelled by

some influence stood still looking at him with a little glow behind the smile in her eyes. A good deal was revealed to both of them in that instant, but the man dare not admit it, and was master of himself.

"Yes," he said, very simply, "I am glad you are across."

Maud Barrington laughed. "I scarcely fancy the risk was very great, but tell me about the bridge," she said. "You are living beside it?"

"Yes," said Winston. "In a tent. I must have it finished before harvest, you see!"

The girl understood why this was necessary, but deciding that she had on other occasions ventured sufficiently far with that topic, moved on across the bridge.

"A tent," she said, "cannot be a very comfortable place to live in, and who cooks for you?"

Winston smiled dryly. "I am used to it, and can do all the cooking that is necessary," he said. "It is the usual home for the beginner, and I lived six months in one—on grindstone bread, the tinctured glucose you are probably not acquainted with as 'drips,' and rancid pork—when I first came out to this country and hired myself, for ten dollars monthly, to another man. It is a diet one gets a little tired of occasionally, but after breaking prairie twelve hours every day one can eat almost anything, and when I afterwards turned farmer my credit was rarely good enough to provide the pork."

The girl looked at him curiously, for she knew how some of the smaller settlers lived, and once more felt divided between wonder and sympathy. She could picture the grim self-denial, for she had seen the stubborn patience in this man's face, as well as a stamp that was not born by any other man at Silverdale. Some of the crofter settlers, who periodically came near starvation in

their sod hovels, and the men from Ontario who staked their little handful of dollars on the first wheat crop to be wrested from the prairie, bore it, however. From what Miss Barrington had told her, it was clear that Courthorne's first year in Canada could not have been spent in this fashion, but there was no doubt in the girl's mind as she listened. Her faith was equal to a more strenuous test.

"There is a difference in the present, but who taught you bridge-building? It takes years to learn the use of the ax," she said.

Winston laughed. "I think it took me four, but the man who has not a dollar to spare usually finds out how to do a good many things for himself, and I had working drawings of the bridge made in Winnipeg. Besides, your friends have helped me with their hands as well as their good-will. Except at the beginning, they have all been kind to me, and one could not well have expected very much from them then."

Maud Barrington colored a trifle as she remembered her own attitude towards him. "Cannot you forget it?" she said, with a curious little ring in her voice. "They would do anything you asked them now."

"One generally finds it useful to have a good memory, and I remember most clearly that, although they had very little reason for it, most of them afterwards trusted me. That made, and still makes, a great difference to me."

The girl appeared thoughtful. "Does it?" she said. "Still, do you know, I fancy that if they had tried to drive you out, you would have stayed in spite of them?"

"Yes," said Winston dryly. "I believe I would, but the fact that in a very little while they held out a

friendly hand to a stranger steeped in suspicion, and gave him the chance to prove himself their equal, carries a big responsibility. That, and your aunt's goodness, puts so many things one might have done out of the question."

The obvious inference was that the prodigal had been reclaimed by the simple means of putting him on his honor, but that did not for a moment suggest itself to the girl. She had often regretted her own disbelief and once more felt the need for reparation.

"Lance," she said, very quietly, "my aunt was wiser than I was, but she was mistaken. What she gave you out of her wide charity was already yours by right."

That was complete and final, for Maud Barrington did nothing by half, and Winston recognized that she held him blameless in the past, which she could not know, as well as in the present, which was visible to her. Her confidence stung him as a whip, and when in place of answering he looked away, the girl fancied that a smothered groan escaped him. She waited, curiously expectant, but he did not speak, and just then the fall of hoofs rose from behind the birches in the bluff. Then a man's voice came through it singing a little French song, and Maud Barrington glanced at her companion.

"Lance," she said, "how long is it since you sang that song?"

"Well," said Winston, doggedly conscious of what he was doing, "I do not know a word of it, and never heard it in my life."

Maud Barrington stared at him. "Think," she said. "It seems ever so long ago, but you cannot have forgotten. Surely you remember Madame Aubert, who taught me to prattle in French, and the day you slipped into the music-room and picked up the song, while she

tried in vain to teach it me. Can't you recollect how I cried, when you sang it in the billiard-room, and Uncle Geoffrey gave you the half-soverign which had been promised to me?"

"No," said Winston, a trifle hoarsely, and with his head turned from her watched the trail.

A man in embroidered deerskin jacket was riding into the moonlight, and though the little song had ceased, and the wide hat hid his face, there was an almost insolent gracefulness in his carriage that seemed familiar to Winston. It was not the *abandon* of the swashbuckler stock-rider from across the frontier, but something more finished and distinguished that suggested the bygone cavalier. Maud Barrington, it was evident, also noticed it.

"Geoffrey Courthorne rode as that man does," she said. "I remember hearing my mother once tell him that he had been born too late, because his attributes and tastes would have fitted him to follow Prince Rupert."

Winston made no answer, and the man rode on until he drew bridle in front of them. Then he swung his hat off, and while the moonlight shone into his face looked down with a little ironical smile at the man and woman standing beside the horse. Winston closed one hand a trifle, and slowly straightened himself, feeling that there was need of all his self-control, for he saw his companion glance at him, and then almost too steadily at Lance Courthorne.

The latter said nothing for a space of seconds, for which Winston hated him, and yet in the tension of the suspense he noticed that the signs of indulgence he had seen on the last occasion were plainer in Courthorne's face. The little bitter smile upon his lips was also

not quite in keeping with the restlessness of his fingers upon the bridle.

"Is that bridge fit for crossing, farmer?" he asked.

"Yes," said Winston quietly. "You must lead your horse."

Maud Barrington had in the meanwhile stood very still, and now moved as by an effort. "It is time I rode on, and you can show the stranger across," she said. "I have kept you at least five minutes longer than was necessary."

Courthorne, Winston fancied, shifted one foot from the stirrup, but then sat still as the farmer held his hand for the girl to mount by, while when she rode away he looked at his companion with a trace of anger as well as irony in his eyes.

"Yes," said Winston. "What you heard was correct. Miss Barrington's horse fell lame coming from one of the farms, which accounts for her passing here so late. I had just led the beast across the incompleted bridge. Still, it is not on my account I tell you this. Where have you been and why have you broken one of my conditions?"

Courthorne laughed. "It seems to me you are adopting a somewhat curious tone. I went to my homestead to look for you."

"You have not answered my other question, and in the meanwhile I am your tenant, and the place is mine."

"We really needn't quibble," said Courthorne. "I came for the very simple reason that I wanted money."

"You had one thousand dollars," said Winston dryly.

Courthorne made a little gesture of resignation. "It is, however, certain that I haven't got them now. They went as dollars usually do. The fact is, I have met one or two men recently who apparently know rather more

games of chance than I do, and I passed on the fame, which was my most valuable asset, to you."

"You passed me on the brand of a crime I never committed," said Winston grimly. "That, however, is not the question now. Not one dollar, except at the time agreed upon, will you get from me. Why did you come here dressed as we usually are on the prairie?"

Courthorne glanced down at the deerskin jacket and smiled as he straightened himself into a caricature of Winston's mounted attitude. It was done cleverly.

"When I ride in this fashion we are really not very unlike, you see, and I let one or two men I met get a good look at me," he said. "I meant it as a hint that it would be wise of you to come to terms with me."

"I have done so already. You made the bargain."

"Well," said Courthorne, smiling, "a contract may be modified at any time when both parties are willing."

"One is not," said Winston dryly. "You heard my terms, and nothing that you can urge will move me a hairsbreadth from them."

Courthorne looked at him steadily, and some men would have found his glance disconcerting, for now and then all the wickedness that was in him showed in his half-closed eyes. Still, he saw that the farmer was unyielding.

"Then we will let it go; in the meanwhile," he said, "take me across the bridge."

They were half-way along it when he pulled the horse up, and once more looked down on Winston.

"Your hand is a tolerably good one so long as you are willing to sacrifice yourself, but it has its weak points, and there is one thing I could not tolerate," he said.

"What is that?"

Courthorne laughed wickedly. "You wish me to be

explicit? Maud Barrington is devilishly pretty, but it is quite out of the question that you should ever marry her."

Winston turned towards him with the veins on his forehead swollen. "Granting that it is so, what is that to you?"

Courthorne nodded as if in comprehension. "Well, I'm probably not consistent, but one rarely quite loses touch with everything, and if I believed that my kinswoman was growing fond of a beggarly prairie farmer, I'd venture to put a sudden stop to your love-making. This, at least, is perfectly *bona fide,* Winston."

Winston had borne a good deal of late, and his hatred of the man flared up. He had no definite intention, but he moved a pace forward, and Courthorne touched the horse with his heel. It backed, and then, growing afraid of the blackness about it, plunged, while Winston for the first time saw that there was a gap in the loosely-laid planking close behind it. Another plunge or flounder, and horse and rider would go down together.

For a moment he held his breath and watched. Then, as the beast resisting its rider's efforts backed again, he sprang forward and seized the bridle.

"Get your spurs in! Shove him forward for your life," he said.

There was a momentary struggle on the slippery planking, and, almost as its hind hoofs overhung the edge, Winston dragged the horse away. Courthorne swung himself out of the saddle, left the farmer the bridle, and glanced behind him at the gap. Then he turned, and the two men looked at each other steadily. Their faces were a trifle paler than usual.

"You saw it?" asked Courthorne.

"Yes, but not until you backed the beast and he commenced plunging."

"He plunged once or twice before you caught the bridle."

"Yes," said Winston quietly.

Courthorne laughed. "You are a curious man. It would have cleared the ground for you."

"No," said Winston dryly. "I don't know that you will understand me, but I scarcely think it would. It may have been a mistake of mine to do what I did, but I have a good deal on my shoulders already."

Courthorne made no answer as he led his horse across the bridge. Then he mounted, and looked down on the farmer who stood beside him.

"I remember some things, though I don't always let them influence me to my detriment," he said. "I'm going back to the railroad, and then West, and don't quite know when you will have the pleasure of seeing me again."

Winston watched him quietly. "It would be wiser if you did not come back until I send for you."

CHAPTER XX

COURTHORNE BLUNDERS

VANCE COURTHORNE had lightly taken a good many risks in his time, for he usually found a spice of danger stimulating, and there was in him an irresponsible daring that not infrequently served him better than a well-laid plan. There are also men of his type, who for a time, at least, appear immune from the disasters which follow the one rash venture the prudent make, and it was half in frolic and half in malice he rode to Silverdale dressed as a prairie farmer in the light of day, and forgot that their occupation sets a stamp he had never worn upon the tillers of the soil. The same spirit induced him to imitate one or two of Winston's gestures for the benefit of his cook, and afterwards wait for a police trooper, who apparently desired to overtake him when he had just left the homestead.

He pulled his horse up when the other man shouted to him, and trusting in the wide hat that hid most of his face, smiled out of half-closed eyes when he handed a packet.

"You have saved me a ride, Mr. Courthorne. I heard you were at the bridge," the trooper said. "If you'll sign for those documents I needn't keep you."

He brought out a pencil, and Courthorne scribbled on the paper handed him. He was quite aware that there was a risk attached to this, but if Winston had any communications with the police, it appeared ad-

visable to discover what they were about. Then he laughed, as riding on again he opened the packet.

"Agricultural Bureau documents," he said. "This lot to be returned filled in! Well, if I can remember, I'll give them to Winston."

As it happened, he did not remember, but he made a worse mistake just before his departure from the railroad settlement. He had spent two nights at a little wooden hotel, which was not the one where Winston put up when he drove into the place, and to pass the time commenced a flirtation with the proprietor's daughter. The girl was pretty, and Courthorne a man of different type from the wheat-growers she had been used to. When his horse was at the door, he strolled into the saloon where he found the girl alone in the bar.

"I'm a very sad man, to-day, my dear," he said, and his melancholy became him.

The girl blushed prettily. "Still," she said, "whenever you want to, you can come back again."

"If I did would you be pleased to see me?"

"Of course!" said the girl. "Now, you wait a minute, and I'll give you something to remember me by. I don't mix this up for everybody."

She busied herself with certain decanters and essences, and Courthorne held the glass she handed him high.

"The brightest eyes and the reddest lips between Winnipeg and the Rockies!" he said. "This is nectar, but I would like to remember you by something sweeter still!"

Their heads were not far apart when he laid down his glass, and before the girl quite knew what was happening, an arm was round her neck. Next moment she had

flung the man backwards, and stood very straight, quivering with anger and crimson in face, for Courthorne, as occasionally happens with men of his type, assumed too much, and did not always know when to stop. Then she called sharply, "Jake!"

There was a tramp of feet outside, and when a big grim-faced man looked in at the door, Courthorne decided it was time for him to effect his retreat while it could be done with safety. He knew already that there were two doors to the saloon, and his fingers closed on the neck of a decanter. Next moment it smote the newcomer on the chest, and while he staggered backwards with the fluid trickling from him, Courthorne departed through the opposite entrance. Once outside, he mounted leisurely, but nobody came out from the hotel, and shaking the bridle with a little laugh he cantered out of the settlement.

In the meanwhile the other man carefully wiped his garments, and then turned to his companion.

"Now what's all this about?" he asked.

The girl told him, and the man ruminated for a minute or two. "Well, he's gone, and I don't know that I'm sorry there wasn't a circus here," he said. "I figured there was something not square about that fellow any way. Registered as Guyler from Minnesota, but I've seen somebody like him among the boys from Silverdale. Guess I'll find out when I ride over about the horse, and then I'll have a talk with him quietly."

In the meanwhile, the police trooper who had handed him the packet returned to the outpost, and, as it happened, found the grizzled Sergeant Stimson, who appeared astonished to see him back so soon, there.

"I met Courthorne near his homestead, and gave him the papers, sir," he said.

"You did?" said the Sergeant. "Now that's kind of curious, because he's at the bridge."

"It couldn't have been anybody else, because he took the documents and signed for them," said the trooper.

"Big bay horse?"

"No, sir," said the trooper. "It was a bronco, and a screw at that."

"Well," said Stimson dryly, "let me have your book. If Payne has come in, tell him I want him."

The trooper went out, and when his comrade came in, Stimson laid a strip of paper before him. "You have seen Courthorne's writing," he said: "would you call it anything like that?"

"No, sir," said Trooper Payne. "I would not!"

Stimson nodded. "Take a good horse, and ride round by the bridge. If you find Courthorne there, as you probably will, head for the settlement and see if you can come across a man who might pass for him. Ask your questions as though the answer didn't count, and tell nobody what you hear but me."

Payne rode out, and when he returned three days later, Sergeant Stimson made a journey to confer with one of his superiors. The officer was a man who had risen in the service somewhat rapidly, and when he heard the tale, said nothing while he turned over a bundle of papers a trooper brought him. Then he glanced at Stimson thoughtfully.

"I have a report of the Shannon shooting case here," he said. "How did it strike you at the time?"

Stimson's answer was guarded. "As a curious affair. You see, it was quite easy to get at Winston's character from anybody down there, and he wasn't the kind of man to do the thing. There were one or two other trifles I couldn't quite figure out the meaning of."

"Winston was drowned?" said the officer.

"Well," said Stimson, "the trooper who rode after him heard him break through the ice, but nobody ever found him, though a farmer came upon his horse."

The officer nodded. "I fancy you are right, and the point is this. There were two men, who apparently bore some resemblance to each other, engaged in an unlawful venture, and one of them commits a crime nobody believed him capable of, but which would have been less out of keeping with the other's character. Then the second man comes into an inheritance, and leads a life which seems to have astonished everybody who knows him. Now, have you ever seen these two men side by side?"

"No, sir," said Stimson. "Courthorne kept out of our sight when he could, in Alberta, and I don't think I or any of the boys, except Shannon, ever saw him for more than a minute or two. Now and then we passed Winston on the prairie or saw him from the trail, but I think I only once spoke to him."

"Well," said the officer, "it seems to me I had better get you sent back to your old station, where you can quietly pick up the threads again. Would the trooper you mentioned be fit to keep an eye on things at Silverdale?"

"No one better, sir," said Stimson.

"Then it shall be done," said the officer. "The quieter you keep the affair the better."

It was a week or two later when Winston returned to his homestead from the bridge, which was almost completed. Dusk was closing in, but as he rode down the rise he could see the wheat roll in slow ripples back into the distance. The steady beat of its rhythmic murmur told of heavy ears, and where the stalks stood

He Could See the Wheat Roll in Slow Ripples Back into the Distance.

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waist-high on the rise, the last flush of saffron in the northwest was flung back in a dull bronze gleam. The rest swayed athwart the shadowy hollow, dusky indigo and green, but that flash of gold and red told that harvest was nigh again.

Winston had seen no crop to compare with it during the eight years he had spent in the dominion. There had been neither drought nor hail that year, and now, when the warm western breezes kept sweet and wholesome the splendid ears they fanned, there was removed from him the terror of the harvest frost, which not infrequently blights the fairest prospects in one bitter night. Fate, which had tried him hardly hitherto, denying the seed its due share of fertilizing rain, sweeping his stock from existence with icy blizzard, and mowing down the tall green corn with devastating hail, was now showering favors on him when it was too late. Still, though he felt the irony of it, he was glad, for others had followed his lead, and while the lean years had left a lamentable scarcity of dollars at Silverdale, wealth would now pour in to every man who had had the faith to sow.

He dismounted beside the oats which he would harvest first, and listened with a curious stirring of his pulses to their musical patter. It was not the full-toned song of the wheat, but there was that in the quicker beat of it which told that each graceful tassel would redeem its promise. He could not see the end of them, but by the right of the producer they were all his. He knew that he could also hold them by right of conquest, too, for that year a knowledge of his strength had been forced upon him. Still, from something he had seen in the eyes of a girl and grasped in the words of a white-haired lady, he realized that there is a limit

beyond which man's ambition may not venture, and a right before which even that of possession must bow.

It had been shown him plainly that no man of his own devices can make the wheat grow, and standing beside it in the creeping dusk he felt in a vague, half-pagan fashion that there was, somewhere behind what appeared the chaotic chances of life, a scheme of order and justice immutable, which would in due time crush the too presumptuous human atom who opposed himself to it. Regret and rebellion were, it seemed, equally futile, and he must go out from Silverdale before retribution overtook him. He had done wrong, and, though he had made what reparation he could, knew that he would carry his punishment with him.

The house was almost dark when he reached it, and as he went in, his cook signed to him. "There's a man in here waiting for you," he said. "He doesn't seem in any way friendly or civil."

Winston nodded as he went on, wondering with a grim expectancy whether Courthorne had returned again. If he had, he felt in a mood for very direct speech with him. His visitor was, however, not Courthorne. Winston could see that at a glance, although the room was dim.

"I don't seem to know you, but I'll get a light in a minute," he said.

"I wouldn't waste time," said the other. "We can talk just as straight in the dark, and I guess this meeting will finish up outside on the prairie. You've given me a good deal of trouble to trail you, Mr. Guyler."

"Well," said Winston dryly, "it seems to me that you have found the wrong man."

The stranger laughed unpleasantly. "I was figuring you'd take it like that, but you can't bluff me. Well

now, I've come round to take it out of you for slinging that decanter at me, and if there is another thing we needn't mention it."

Winston stared at the man, and his astonishment was evident, but the fact that he still spoke with an English accentuation, as Courthorne did, was against him.

"To the best of my recollection, I have never suffered the unpleasantness of meeting you in my life," he said. "I certainly never threw a decanter or anything else at you, though I understand that one might feel tempted to."

The man rose up slowly, and appeared big and heavy-shouldered as he moved athwart the window. "I guess that is quite enough for me," he said. "What were you condemned Englishmen made for, any way, but to take the best of what other men worked for, until the folks who've got grit enough run you out of the old country! Lord, why don't they drown you instead of dumping you and your wickedness on to us? Still, I'm going to show one of you, as I've longed to do, that you can't play your old tricks with the women of this country."

"I don't see the drift of a word of it," said Winston. "Hadn't you better come back to-morrow, when you've worked the vapors off?"

"Come out!" said the other man grimly. "There's scarcely room in here. Well then, have it your own way, and the devil take care of you!"

"I think there's enough," said Winston, and as the other sprang forward, closed with him.

He felt sick and dizzy for a moment, for he had laid himself open and the first blow got home, but he had decided that if the grapple was inevitable, it was best to commence it and end it speedily. A few seconds later

there was a crash against the table, and the stranger gasped as he felt the edge of it pressed into his backbone. Then he felt himself borne backwards until he groaned under the strain, and heard a hoarse voice say: "If you attempt to use that foot again, I'll make the leg useless all your life to you. Come right in here, Tom."

A man carrying a lantern came in, and stared at the pair as he set it down. "Do you want me to see a fair finish-up?" he asked.

"No," said Winston. "I want you to see this gentleman out with me. Nip his arms behind his back, he can't hurt you."

It was done with a little difficulty, and there was a further scuffle in the hall, for the stranger resisted strenuously, but a minute later the trio reeled out of the door just as a buggy pulled up. Then, as the evicted man plunged forward alone, Winston, straightening himself suddenly, saw that Colonel Barrington was looking down on him, and that his niece was seated at his side. He stood still, flushed and breathless, with his jacket hanging rent half-way up about him, and the Colonel's voice was quietly ironical.

"I had a question or two to ask you, but can wait," he said. "No doubt I shall find you less engaged another time."

He flicked the horse, and as the buggy rolled away the other man walked up to Winston.

"While I only wanted to get rid of you before, I feel greatly tempted to give you your wish now," said the latter.

The stranger laughed dryly. "I guess you needn't worry. I don't fight because I'm fond of it, and you're not the man."

"Not the man?" said Winston.

"No, sir," said the other. "Not like him, now I can see you better. Well, I'm kind of sorry I started a circus here."

A suspicion of the truth flashed upon Winston. "What sort of a man was the one you mistook for me?"

"Usual British waster. Never done a day's work in his life, and never wanted to, too tired to open his eyes more than half-way when he looked at you, but if he ever fools round the saloon again, he'll know what he is before I'm through with him."

Winston laughed. "I wouldn't be rash or you may get another astonishment," he said. "We really know one or two useful things in the old country, but you can't fetch the settlement before morning, and we'll put you up if you like."

"No, sir," said the other dryly. "I'm not fond of Englishmen, and we might get arguing, while I've had 'bout enough of you for one night."

He rode away, and Winston went back into the house very thoughtfully, wondering whether he would be called upon to answer for more of Courthorne's doings.

It was two or three days later when Maud Barrington returned with her aunt from a visit to an outlying farm, where, because an account of what took place in the saloon had by some means been spread about, she heard a story brought in from the settlement. It kept her silent during the return journey, and Miss Barrington said nothing, but when the Colonel met them in the hall, he glanced at his niece.

"I see Mrs. Carndall has been telling you both a tale," he said. "It would have been more fitting if she had kept it to herself."

"Yes," said Maud Barrington. "Still, you do not credit it?"

Barrington smiled a trifle dryly. "I should very much prefer not to, my dear, but what we saw the other night appears to give it probability. The man Courthorne was dismissing somewhat summarily is, I believe, to marry the lady in question. You will remember I asked you once before whether the leopard can change his spots."

The girl laughed a little. "Still, are you not presuming when you take it for granted that there are spots to change?"

Colonel Barrington said nothing further, and it was late that night when the two women reopened the subject.

"Aunt," said Maud Barrington, "I want to know what you think about Mrs. Carndall's tale."

The little lady shook her head. "I should like to disbelieve it if I could."

"Then," said Maud Barrington, "why don't you?"

"Can you give me any reasons? One must not expect too much from human nature, my dear."

The girl sat silent a while, remembering the man who she had at first sight, and in the moonlight, fancied was like her companion at the time. It was not, however, the faint resemblance that had impressed her, but a vague something in his manner, his grace, his half-veiled insolence, his poise in the saddle. She had only seen Lance Courthorne on a few occasions when she was very young, but she had seen others of his race, and the man reminded her of them. Still, she felt half-instinctively that as yet it would be better that nobody should know this, and she stooped over some lace on the table as she answered the elder lady.

"I only know one, and it is convincing. That Lance

should have done what he is credited with doing, is quite impossible."

Miss Barrington smiled. "I almost believe so, too, but others of his family have done such things somewhat frequently. Do you know that Lance has all along been a problem to me, for there is a good deal in my brother's question. Although it seems out of the question, I have wondered whether there could be two Lance Courthornes in Western Canada."

The girl looked at her aunt in silence for a space, but each hid a portion of her thoughts. Then Maud Barrington laughed.

"The Lance Courthorne now at Silverdale is as free from reproach as any man may be," she said. "I can't tell you why I am sure of it—but I know I am not mistaken."

CHAPTER XXI

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

IT was a hot morning when Sergeant Stimson and Corporal Payne rode towards the railroad across the prairie. The grassy levels rolled away before them, white and parched, into the blue distance, where willow grove and straggling bluff floated on the dazzling horizon, and the fibrous dust rose in little puffs beneath the horses' feet, until Stimson pulled his beast up in the shadow of the birches by the bridge, and looked back towards Silverdale. There, wooden homesteads girt about with barns and granaries rose from the whitened waste, and behind some of them stretched great belts of wheat. Then the Sergeant, understanding the faith of the men who had sown that splendid grain, nodded, for he was old and wise, and had seen many adverse seasons, and the slackness that comes, when hope has gone, to beaten men.

"They will reap this year—a handful of cents on every bushel," he said. "A fine gentleman is Colonel Barrington, but some of them will be thankful there's a better head than the one he has, at Silverdale."

"Yes, sir," said Corporal Payne, who wore the double chevrons for the first time, and surmised that his companion's observations were not without their purpose.

Stimson glanced at the bridge. "Good work," he said. "It will save them dollars on every load they haul in. A gambler built it! Do they teach men to use the ax in Montana saloons?"

The corporal smiled, and waited for what he felt would come. He was no longer the hot-blooded lad who had come out from the old country, for he had felt the bonds of discipline, and been taught restraint and silence on the lonely marches of the prairie.

"I have," he said tentatively, "fancied there was something a little unusual about the thing."

Stimson nodded, but his next observation was apparently quite unconnected with the topic. "You were a raw colt when I got you, Payne, and the bit galled you now and then, but you had good hands on a bridle, and somebody who knew his business had taught you to sit a horse in the old country. Still, you were not as handy with brush and fork at stable duty."

The bronze seemed to deepen in the corporal's face, but it was turned steadily towards his officer. "Sir," he said, "has that anything to do with what you were speaking of?"

Stimson laughed softly. "That depends, my lad. Now, I've taught you to ride straight, and to hold your tongue. I've asked you no questions, but I've eyes in my head, and it's not without a purpose you've been made corporal. You're the kind they give commissions to, now and then—and your folks in the old country never raised you for a police trooper."

"Can you tell me how to win one?" ask the corporal, and Stimson noticed the little gleam in his eyes.

"There's one road to advancement, and you know where to find the trooper's duty laid down plain," he said, with a dry smile. "Now, you saw Lance Courthorne once or twice back there in Alberta?"

"Yes, sir, but never close to."

"And you knew farmer Winston?"

Payne appeared thoughtful. "Of course I met him

a few times on the prairie, always on horseback with his big hat on, but Winston is dead—that is, I heard him break through the ice."

The men's eyes met for a moment, and Stimson smiled curiously. "There is," he said, "still a warrant out for him. Now, you know where I am going, and, while I am away, you will watch Courthorne and his homestead. If anything curious happens there, you will let me know. The new man has instructions to find you any duty that will suit you."

The corporal looked at his officer steadily, and again there was comprehension in his eyes. Then he nodded. "Yes, sir. I have wondered whether, if Shannon could have spoken another word that night, it would have been Winston the warrant was issued for."

Stimson raised a restraining hand. "My lad," he said dryly, "the police trooper who gets advancement is the one that carries out his orders and never questions them, until he can show that they are wrong. Then he uses a good deal of discretion. Now you know your duty?"

"Yes, sir," said Payne, and Stimson, shaking his bridle, cantered off across the prairie.

Then, seeing no need to waste time, the corporal rode towards Courthorne's homestead, and found its owner stripping a binder. Pieces of the machine lay all around him, and from the fashion in which he handled them it was evident that he was capable of doing what the other men at Silverdale left to the mechanic at the settlement. Payne wondered, as he watched him, who had taught the gambler to use spanner and file.

"I will not trouble you if you are busy, Mr. Courthorne, but if you would give me the returns the Bureau ask for, it would save me riding round again," he said.

"I'm afraid I can't," said Winston. "You see, I haven't had the papers."

"Trooper Bacon told me he had given them to you."

"I don't seem to remember it," said Winston.

Payne laughed. "One forgets things when he is busy. Still, you had them—because you signed for them."

Winston looked up suddenly, and in another moment smiled, but he was a trifle too late, for Payne had seen his astonishment, and that he was now on guard.

"Well," he said, "I haven't got them now. Send me a duplicate. You have, no doubt, some extra forms at the outpost."

Payne decided that the man had never had the documents, but was too clever to ask any questions or offer explanations that might involve him. It was evident he knew that somebody had personated him, and the fact sent a little thrill through the corporal; he was at least on the trail.

"I'll bring you one round the next time I'm in the neighborhood," he said, and Winston sat still with the spanner lying idle in his hand when he rode away.

He realized that Courthorne had taken the papers, and his face grew anxious as well as grim. The harvest was almost ready now, and a little while would see it in. Then his work would be over, but he had of late felt a growing fear lest something, that would prevent its accomplishment, might happen in the meanwhile. Then almost fiercely he resumed the stripping of the machine.

An hour or two later Dane rode up, and sat still in his saddle looking down on Winston with a curious smile on his face.

"I was down at the settlement, and found a curious

story going round," he said. "Of course, it had its humorous aspect, but I don't know that the thing was quite discreet. You see, Barrington has once or twice had to put a stern check on the indulgence in playfulness of that kind by some of the younger men, and you are becoming an influence at Silverdale."

"You naturally believed what you heard. It was in keeping with what you have seen of me?"

Dane's eyes twinkled. "I didn't want to, and I must admit that it isn't. Still, a good many of you quiet men are addicted to occasionally astonishing your friends, and I can't help a fancy that you could do that kind of thing as well as most folks, if it pleased you. In fact, there was an artistic finish to the climax that suggested your usual thoroughness."

"It did?" said Winston grimly, remembering his recent visitor and one or two of Courthorne's Albertan escapades. "Still, as I'm afraid I haven't the dramatic instinct, do you mind telling me how?"

Dane laughed. "Well, it is probable there are other men who would have kissed the girl, but I don't know that it would have occurred to them to smash a decanter on the irate lover's head."

Winston felt his fingers tingle for a grip on Courthorne's throat. "And that's what I've been doing lately? You, of course, concluded that after conducting myself in an examplary fashion an astonishing time it was a trifling lapse?"

"Well," said Dane dryly, "as I admitted, it appeared somewhat out of your usual line, but when I heard that a man from the settlement had been ejected with violence from your homestead, what could one believe?"

"Colonel Barrington told you that!"

"No," said Dane, "you know he didn't. Still, he had a hired man riding a horse he'd bought, and I believe—though it is not my affair—Maud Barrington was there. Now, of course, one feels diffident about anything that may appear like preaching, but you see, a good many of us are following you, and I wouldn't like you to have many little lapses of that kind while I'm backing you. You and I have done with these frivolities some time ago, but there are lads here they might appeal to. I should be pleased if you could deny the story."

Winston's face was grim. "I'm afraid it would not suit me to do as much just now," he said. "Still, between you and I, do you believe it likely that I would fly at that kind of game?"

Dane laughed softly. "Well," he said, "tastes differ, and the girl is pretty, while you know, after all, they're very much the same. We have, however, got to look at the thing sensibly, and you admit you can't deny it."

"I told you it wouldn't suit me."

"Then there is a difference?"

Winston nodded. "You must make the best of that, but the others may believe exactly what they please. It will be a fávor to me if you remember it."

Dane smiled curiously. "Then I think it is enough for me, and you will overlook my presumption. Courthorne, I wonder now and then when I shall altogether understand you!"

"The time will come," said Winston dryly, to hide what he felt, for his comrade's simple avowal had been wonderfully eloquent. Then Dane touched his horse with his heel and rode away.

It was two or three weeks later when Winston, being requested to do so, drove over to attend one of the assemblies at Silverdale Grange. It was dark when

he reached the house, for the nights were drawing in, but because of the temperature few of the great oil lamps were lighted, and the windows were open wide. Somebody had just finished singing when he walked into the big general room, and he would have preferred another moment to make his entrance, but disdained to wait. He, however, felt a momentary warmth in his face when Miss Barrington, stately as when he had first seen her in her rustling silk and ancient laces, came forward to greet him with her usual graciousness. He knew that every eye was upon them, and guessed why she had done so much.

What she said was of no moment, but the fact that she had received him without sign of coldness was eloquent, and the man bent very respectfully over the little white hand. Then he stood straight and square for a moment and met her eyes.

"Madam," he said, "I shall know whom to come to when I want a friend."

Afterwards he drifted towards a group of married farmers and their wives, who, except for that open warranty, might have been less cordial to him, and presently, though he was never quite sure how it came about, found himself standing beside Maud Barrington. She smiled at him, and then glanced towards one the open windows, outside which one or two of the older men were sitting.

"The room is very hot," said Winston tentatively.

"Yes," said the girl. "I fancy it would be cooler in the hall."

They passed out together into the shadowy hall, but a little gleam of light from the doorway behind them rested on Maud Barrington as she sat down. She looked inquiringly at the man as though in wait for something.

"It is distinctly cooler here," he said.

Maud Barrington laughed impatiently. "It is," she said.

"Well," said Winston, with a little smile, "I will try again. Wheat has made another advance lately."

The girl turned towards him with a little sparkle in her eyes. Winston saw it, and the faint shimmer of the pearls upon the whiteness of her neck, and then moved his head so that he looked out upon the dusky prairie.

"Pshaw!" she said. "You know why you were brought here to-night."

Winston admired her courage, but did not turn round, for there were times when he feared his will might fail him. "I fancy I know why your aunt was so gracious to me. Do you know that her confidence almost hurts me?"

"Then why don't you vindicate it and yourself? Dane would be your mouthpiece, and two or three words would be sufficient."

Winston made no answer for a space. Somebody was singing in the room behind them, and through the open window he could see the stars in the soft indigo above the great sweep of prairie. He noticed them vacantly and took a curious impersonal interest in the two dim figures standing close together outside the window. One was a young English lad, and the other a girl in a long white dress. What they were doing there was no concern of his, but any trifle that diverted his attention a moment was welcome in that time of strain, for he had felt of late that exposure was close at hand, and was fiercely anxious to finish his work before it came. Maud Barrington's finances must be made secure before he left Silverdale, and he must remain at any cost until the wheat was sold.

Then he turned slowly towards her. "It is not your aunt's confidence that hurts me the most."

The girl looked at him steadily, the color a trifle plainer in her face, which she would not turn from the light, and a growing wonder in her eyes.

"Lance," she said, "we both know that it is not misplaced. Still, your impassiveness does not please us."

Winston groaned inwardly and the swollen veins showed on his forehead. His companion had leaned forward a little so that she could see him, and one white shoulder almost touched his own. The perfume of her hair was in his nostrils, and when he remembered how cold she had once been to him, a longing that was stronger than the humiliation that came with it grew almost overwhelming. Still, because of her very trust in him, there was a wrong he could not do, and it dawned on him that a means of placing himself beyond further temptation was opening to him. Maud Barrington, he knew, would have scanty sympathy with an intrigue of the kind Courthorne's recent adventure pointed to.

"You mean, why do I not deny what you have no doubt heard?" he said. "What could one gain by that if you had heard the truth?"

Maud Barrington laughed softly. "Isn't the question useless?"

"No," said Winston, a trifle hoarsely now.

The girl touched his arm almost imperiously as he turned his head again.

"Lance," she said. "Men of your kind need not deal in subterfuge. The wheat and the bridge you built speak for you."

"Still," persisted Winston, and the girl checked him with a smile.

"I fancy you are wasting time," she said. "Now, I wonder whether, when you were in England, you ever saw a play founded on an incident in the life of a once famous actor. At the time it rather appealed to me. The hero, with a chivalric purpose assumed various shortcomings he had really no sympathy with—but while there is, of course, no similarity beyond the generous impulse, between the cases—he did not do it clumsily. It is, however, a trifle difficult to understand what purpose you could have, and one cannot help fancying that you owe a little to Silverdale and yourself."

It was a somewhat daring parallel, for Winston, who dare not look at his companion and saw that he had failed, knew the play.

"Isn't the subject a trifle difficult?" he asked.

"Then," said Maud Barrington, "we will end it. Still, you promised that I should understand—a good deal—when the time came."

Winston nodded gravely. "You shall," he said.

Then, somewhat to his embarrassment, the two figures moved further across the window, and as they were silhouetted against the blue duskiness, he saw that there was an arm about the waist of the girl's white dress. He became sensible that Maud Barrington saw it too, and then that, perhaps to save the situation, she was smiling. The two figures, however, vanished, and a minute later a young girl in a long white dress came in, and stood still, apparently dismayed when she saw Maud Barrington. She did not notice Winston, who sat further in the shadow. He, however, saw her face suddenly crimson.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Yes," said Maud Barrington, with a significant glance towards the window. "At least ten minutes.

I am sorry, but I really couldn't help it. It was very hot in the other room, and Allender was singing."

"Then," said the girl, with a little tremor in her voice, "you will not tell?"

"No," said Maud Barrington. "But you must not do it again."

The girl stooped swiftly and kissed her, then recoiled with a gasp when she saw the man, but Maud Barrington laughed.

"I think," she said, "I can answer for Mr. Courthorne's silence. Still, when I have an opportunity, I am going to lecture you."

Winston turned with a twinkle he could not quite repress in his eyes, and with a flutter of her dress the girl whisked away.

"I'm afraid this makes me an accessory, but I can only neglect my manifest duty, which would be to warn her mother," said Maud Barrington.

"Is it a duty?" asked Winston, feeling that the further he drifted away from the previous topic the better it would be for him.

"Some people would fancy so," said his companion. "Lily will have a good deal of money, by and by, and she is very young. Atterly has nothing but an unprofitable farm; but he is an honest lad, and I know she is very fond of him."

"And would that count against the dollars?"

Maud Barrington laughed a little. "Yes," she said quietly. "I think it would if the girl is wise. Even now such things do happen, but I fancy it is time I went back again."

She moved away, but Winston stayed where he was until the lad came in with a cigar in his hand.

"Hallo, Courthorne!" he said. "Did you notice anybody pass the window a little while ago?"

"You are the first to come in through it," said Winston dryly. "The kind of things you wear admit of climbing."

The lad glanced at him with a trace of embarrassment.

"I don't quite understand you, but I meant a man," he said. "He was walking curiously, as if he was half-asleep, but he slipped round the corner of the building and I lost him."

Winston laughed. "There's a want of finish in the tale, but you needn't worry about me. I didn't see a man."

"There is rather less wisdom than usual in your remarks to-night, but I tell you I saw him," said the lad.

He passed on, and a minute later there was a cry from the inner room. "It's there again! Can't you see the face at the window?"

Winston was in the larger room next moment, and saw, as a startled girl had evidently done, a face that showed distorted and white to ghastliness through the window. He also recognized it, and running back through the hall was outside in another few seconds. Courthorne was leaning against one of the casements as though faint with weakness or pain, and collapsed when Winston dragged him backwards into the shadow. He had scarcely laid him down when the window was opened, and Colonel Barrington's shoulders showed black against the light.

"Come outside alone, sir," said Winston.

Barrington did so, and Winston stood so that no light fell on the pallid face in the grass. "It's a man I have

dealings with," he said. "He has evidently ridden out from the settlement and fallen from his horse."

"Why should he fall?" asked the Colonel.

Winston laughed. "There is a perfume about him that is tolerably conclusive. I was, however, on the point of going, and if you will tell your hired man to get my wagon out, I'll take him away quietly. You can make light of the affair to the others."

"Yes," said Barrington. "Unless you think the man is hurt, that would be best, but we'll keep him if you like."

"No, sir. I couldn't trouble you," said Winston hastily. "Men of his kind are also very hard to kill."

Five minutes later he and the hired man hoisted Courthorne into the wagon and packed some hay about him, while, soon after the rattle of wheels sank into the silence of the prairie, the girl Maud Barrington had spoken to rejoined her companion.

"Could Courthorne have seen you coming in?" he asked.

"Yes," said the girl, blushing. "He did."

"Then it can't be helped, and, after all, Courthorne wouldn't talk, even if he wasn't what he is," said the lad. "You don't know why, and I'm not going to tell you, but it wouldn't become him."

"You don't mean Maud Barrington?" asked his companion.

"No," said the lad, with a laugh. "Courthorne is not like me. He has no sense. It's quite another kind of girl, you see."

CHAPTER XXII

COLONEL BARRINGTON IS CONVINCED

IT was not until early morning that Courthorne awakened from the stupor he sank into soon after Winston conveyed him into his homestead. First, however, he asked for a little food, and ate it with apparent difficulty. When Winston came in he looked up from the bed where he lay, with the dust still white upon his clothing, and his face showed gray and haggard in the creeping light.

"I'm feeling a trifle better now," he said; "still, I scarcely fancy I could get up just yet. I gave you a little surprise last night?"

Winston nodded. "You did. Of course, I knew how much your promise was worth, but in view of the risks you ran, I had not expected you to turn up at the Grange."

"The risks!" said Courthorne, with an unpleasant smile.

"Yes," said Winston wearily, "I have a good deal on hand I would like to finish here and it will not take me long, but I am quite prepared to give myself up now, if it is necessary."

Courthorne laughed. "I don't think you need, and it wouldn't be wise. You see, even if you made out your innocence, which you couldn't do, you rendered yourself an accessory by not denouncing me long ago. I fancy we can come to an understanding which would be pleasanter to both of us."

"The difficulty," said Winston, "is that an understanding is useless when made with a man who never keeps his word."

"Well," said Courthorne dryly, "we shall gain nothing by paying each other compliments, and whether you believe it or otherwise, it was not by intention I turned up at the Grange. I was coming here from a place west of the settlement, and you can see that I have been ill if you look at me. I counted too much on my strength, couldn't find a homestead where I could get anything to eat, and the rest may be accounted for by the execrable brandy I had with me. Any way, the horse threw me and made off, and after lying under some willows a good deal of the day, I dragged myself along until I saw a house."

"That," said Winston, "is beside the question. What do you want of me? Money in all probability. Well, you will not get it."

"I'm afraid I'm scarcely fit for a discussion now," said Courthorne. "The fact is, it hurts me to talk, and there's an aggressiveness about you which isn't pleasant to a badly-shaken man. Wait until this evening, but there is no necessity for you to ride to the outpost before you have heard me."

"I'm not sure it would be advisable to leave you here," said Winston dryly.

Courthorne smiled ironically. "Use your eyes. Would any one expect me to get up and indulge in a fresh folly? Leave me a little brandy—I need it—and go about your work. You'll certainly find me here when you want me."

Winston, glancing at the man's face, considered this very probable, and went out. He found his cook, who could be trusted, and said to him, "The man yonder

is tolerably sick, and you'll let him have a little brandy and something to eat when he asks for it. Still, you'll bring the decanter away with you, and lock him in whenever you go out."

The man nodded, and making a hasty breakfast, Winston, who had business at several outlying farms, mounted and rode away. It was evening before he returned, and found Courthorne lying in a big chair with a cigar in his hand, languidly *debonair* but apparently ill. His face was curiously pallid, and his eyes dimmer than they had been, but there was a sardonic twinkle in them.

"You take a look at the decanter," said the man, who went up with Winston, carrying a lamp. "He's been wanting brandy all the time, but it doesn't seem to have muddled him."

Winston dismissed the man and sat down in front of Courthorne.

"Well?" he said.

Courthorne laughed. "You ought to be a witty man, though one would scarcely charge you with that. You surmised correctly this morning. It is money I want."

"You had my answer."

"Of course. Still, I don't want very much in the meanwhile, and you haven't heard what led up to the demand, or why I came back to you. You are evidently not curious, but I'm going to tell you. Soon after I left you, I fell very sick, and lay in the saloon of a little desolate settlement for days. The place was suffocating, and the wind blew the alkali dust in. They had only horrible brandy, and bitter water to drink it with, and I lay there on my back, panting, with the flies crawling over me. I knew if I stayed any longer it would finish me, and when there came a merciful cool day I got myself into the saddle and started off to find you. I

don't quite know how I made the journey, and during a good deal of it I couldn't see the prairie, but I knew you would feel there was an obligation on you to do something for me. Of course, I could put it differently."

Winston had as little liking for Courthorne as he had ever had, but he remembered the time when he had lain very sick in his lonely log hut. He also remembered that everything he now held belonged to this man.

"You made the bargain," he said, less decisively.

Courthorne nodded. "Still, I fancy one of the conditions could be modified. Now, if I wait for another three months, I may be dead before the reckoning comes, and while that probably wouldn't grieve you, I could, when it appeared advisable, send for a magistrate and make a desposition."

"You could," said Winston. "I have, however, something of the same kind in contemplation."

Courthorne smiled curiously. "I don't know that it will be necessary. Carry me on until you have sold your crop, and then make a reasonable offer, and it's probable you may still keep what you have at Silverdale. To be quite frank, I've a notion that my time in this world is tolerably limited, and I want a last taste of all it has to offer a man of my capacities before I leave it. One is a long while dead, you know."

Winston nodded, for he understood. He had also during the grim cares of the lean years known the fierce longing for one deep draught of the wine of pleasure, whatever it afterwards cost him.

"It was that which induced you to look for a little relaxation at the settlement at my expense," he said. "A trifle paltry, wasn't it?"

Courthorne laughed. "It seems you don't know me

yet. That was a frolic, indulged in out of humor, for your benefit. You see, your *rôle* demanded a good deal more ability than you ever displayed in it, and it did not seem fitting that a very puritanical and priggish person should pose as me at Silverdale. The little affair was the one touch of verisimilitude about the thing. No doubt my worthy connections are grieving over your lapse."

"My sense of humor had never much chance of developing," said Winston grimly. "What is the matter with you?"

"Pulmonary hemorrhage!" said Courthorne. "Perhaps it was born in me, but I never had much trouble until after that night in the snow at the river. Would you care to hear about it? We're not fond of each other, but after the steer-drivers I've been herding with, it's a relief to talk to a man of moderate intelligence."

"Go on," said Winston.

"Well," said Courthorne, "when the trooper was close behind me, my horse went through the ice, but somehow I crawled out. We were almost across the river, and it was snowing fast, while I had a fancy that I might have saved the horse, but, as the troopers would probably have seen a mounted man, I let him go. The stream sucked him under, and, though you may not believe it, I felt very mean when I saw nothing but the hole in the ice. Then, as the troopers didn't seem inclined to cross, I went on through the snow, and, as it happened, blundered across Jardine's old shanty. There was still a little prairie hay in the place, and I lay in it until morning, dragging fresh armfuls around me as I burnt it in the stove. Did you ever spend a night, wet through, in a place that was ten to twenty under freezing?"

"Yes," said Winston dryly. "I have done it twice."

"Well," said Courthorne, "I fancy that night narrowed in my life for me, but I made out across the prairie in the morning, and as we had a good many friends up and down the country, one of them took care of me."

Winston sat silent a while. The story had held his attention, and the frankness of the man who lay panting a little in his chair had its effect on him. There was no sound from the prairie, and the house was very still.

"Why did you kill Shannon?" he asked, at length.

"Is any one quite sure of his motives?" said Courthorne. "The lad had done something which was difficult to forgive him, but I think I would have let him go if he hadn't recognized me. The world is tolerably good to the man who has no scruples, you see, and I took all it offered me, while it did not seem fitting that a clod of a trooper without capacity for enjoyment, or much more sensibility than the beast he rode, should put an end to all my opportunities. Still, it was only when he tried to warn his comrades he threw his last chance away."

Winston shivered a little at the dispassionate brutality of the speech, and then checked the anger that came upon him.

"Fate, or my own folly, has put it out of my power to denounce you without abandoning what I have set my heart upon, and after all it is not my business," he said. "I will give you five hundred dollars and you can go to Chicago or Montreal, and consult a specialist. If the money is exhausted before I send for you, I will pay your hotel bills, but every dollar will be deducted when we come to the reckoning."

Courthorne laughed a little. "You had better make it seven fifty. Five hundred dollars will not go very far with me."

"Then you will have to husband them," said Winston dryly. "I am paying you at a rate agreed upon for the use of your land and small bank balance handed me, and want all of it. The rent is a fair one in face of the fact that a good deal of the farm consisted of virgin prairie, which can be had from the Government for nothing."

He said nothing further, and soon after he went out Courthorne went to sleep, but Winston sat by an open window with a burned-out cigar in his hand staring at the prairie while the night wore through, until he rose with a shiver in the chill of early morning to commence his task again.

A few days later he saw Courthorne safely into a sleeping car with a ticket for Chicago in his pocket, and felt that a load had been lifted off his shoulders when the train rolled out of the little prairie station. Another week had passed when, riding home one evening, he stopped at the Grange, and as it happened found Maud Barrington alone. She received him without any visible restraint, but he realized that all that had passed at their last meeting was to be tacitly ignored.

"Has your visitor recovered yet?" she asked.

"So far as to leave my place, and I was not anxious to keep him," said Winston, with a little laugh. "I am sorry he disturbed you."

Maud Barrington seemed thoughtful. "I scarcely think the man was to blame."

"No?" said Winston.

The girl looked at him curiously, and shook her head.

"No," she said. "I heard my uncle's explanation, but it was not convincing. I saw the man's face."

It was several seconds before Winston answered, and then he took the bold course.

"Well?" he said.

Maud Barrington made a curious little gesture. "I knew I had seen it before at the bridge, but that was not all. It was vaguely familiar, and I felt I ought to know it. It reminded me of somebody."

"Of me?" and Winston laughed.

"No. There was a resemblance, but it was very superficial. That man's face had little in common with yours."

"These faint likenesses are not unusual," said Winston, and once more Maud Barrington looked at him steadily.

"No," she said, "of course not. Well, we will conclude that my fancies ran away with me, and be practical. What is wheat doing just now?"

"Rising still," said Winston, and regretted the alacrity with which he had seized the opportunity of changing the topic when he saw that it had not escaped the notice of his companion. "You and I and a few others will be rich this year."

"Yes, but I am afraid some of the rest will find it has only further anxieties for them."

"I fancy," said Winston, "you are thinking of one."

Maud Barrington nodded. "Yes. I am sorry for him."

"Then it would please you if I tried to straighten out things for him? It would be difficult, but I believe it could be accomplished."

Maud Barrington's eyes were grateful, but there was

something that Winston could not fathom behind her smile.

"If you undertook it. One could almost believe you had the wonderful lamp," she said.

Winston smiled somewhat dryly. "Then all its virtues will be tested to-night, and I had better make a commencement while I have the courage. Colonel Barrington is in?"

Maud Barrington went with him to the door, and then laid her hand a moment on his arm. "Lance," she said, with a little tremor in her voice, "if there was a time when our distrust hurt you, it has recoiled upon our heads. You have returned it with a splendid generosity."

Winston could not trust himself to answer, but walked straight to Barrington's room, and finding the door open went quietly in. The head of the Silverdale settlement was sitting at a littered table in front of a shaded lamp, and the light that fell upon it showed the care in his face. It grew a trifle grimmer when he saw the younger man.

"Will you sit down?" he said. "I have been looking for a visit from you for some little time. It would have been more fitting had you made it earlier."

Winston nodded as he took a chair. "I fancy I understand you, but I have nothing that you expect to hear to tell you, sir."

"That," said Barrington, "is unfortunate. Now, it is not my business to pose as a censor of the conduct of any man here, except when it affects the community, but their friends have sent out a good many young English lads, some of whom have not been too discreet in the old country, to me. They did not do so solely that

I might teach them farming. A charge of that kind is no light responsibility, and I look for assistance from the men who have almost as large a stake as I have in the prosperity of Silverdale."

"Have you ever seen me do anything you could consider prejudicial to it?" asked Winston.

"I have not," said Colonel Barrington.

"And it was by her own wish Miss Barrington, who, I fancy, is seldom mistaken, asked me to the Grange?"

"It is a good plea," said Barrington. "I cannot question anything my sister does."

"Then we will let it pass, though I am afraid you will consider what I am going to ask a further presumption. You have forward wheat to deliver, and find it difficult to obtain it?"

Barrington's smile was somewhat grim. "In both cases you have surmised correctly."

Winston nodded. "Still, it is not mere inquisitiveness, sir. I fancy I am the only man at Silverdale who can understand your difficulties, and, what is more to the point, suggest a means of obviating them. You still expect to buy at lower prices before the time to make delivery comes?"

Again the care crept into Barrington's face, and he sat silent for almost a minute. Then he said, very slowly, "I feel that I should resent the question, but I will answer. It is what I hope to do."

"Well," said Winston, "I am afraid you will find prices higher still. There is very little wheat in Minnesota this year, and what there was in Dakota was cut down by hail. Millers in St. Paul and Minneapolis are anxious already, and there is talk of a big corner in Chicago. Nobody is offering grain, while you know what land lies fallow in Manitoba, and the activity of

their brokers shows the fears of Winnipeg millers with contracts on hand. This is not my opinion alone. I can convince you from the papers and market reports I see before you."

Barrington could not controvert the unpleasant truth he was still endeavoring to shut his eyes to. "The demand from the East may slacken," he said.

Winston shook his head. "Russia can give them nothing. There was a failure in the Indian monsoon, and South American crops were small. Now, I am going to take a further liberty. How much are you short?"

Barrington was never sure why he told him, but he was hard pressed then, and there was a quiet forcefulness about the younger man that had its effect on him.

"That," he said, holding out a document, "is the one contract I have not covered."

Winston glanced at it. "The quantity is small. Still, money is very scarce and bank interest almost extortionate just now."

Barrington flushed a trifle, and there was anger in his face. He knew the fact that his loss on this sale should cause him anxiety was significant, and that Winston had surmised the condition of his finances tolerably correctly.

"Have you not gone quite far enough?" he said.

Winston nodded. "I fancy I need ask no more, sir. You can scarcely buy the wheat, and the banks will advance nothing further on what you have to offer at Silverdale. It would be perilous to put yourself in the hands of a mortgage broker."

Barrington stood up very grim and straight, and there were not many men at Silverdale who would have met his gaze.

"Your content is a little too apparent, but I can still

resent an impertinence," he said. "Are my affairs your business?"

"Sit down, sir," said Winston. "I fancy they are, and had it not been necessary, I would not have ventured so far. You have done much for Silverdale, and it has cost you a good deal, while it seems to me that every man here has a duty to the head of the settlement. I am, however, not going to urge that point, but have, as you know, a propensity for taking risks. I can't help it. It was probably born in me. Now, I will take that contract up for you."

Barrington gazed at him in bewildered astonishment. "But you would lose on it heavily. How could you overcome a difficulty that is too great for me?"

"Well," said Winston, with a little smile, "it seems I have some ability in dealing with these affairs."

Barrington did not answer for a while, and when he spoke it was slowly. "You have a wonderful capacity for making any one believe in you."

"That is not the point," said Winston. "If you will let me have the contract, or, and it comes to the same thing, buy the wheat it calls for, and if advisable sell as much again, exactly as I tell you, at my risk and expense, I shall get what I want out of it. My affairs are a trifle complicated and it would take some little time to make you understand how this would suit me. In the meanwhile you can give me a mere I O U for the difference between what you sold at, and the price to-day, to be paid without interest and whenever it suits you. It isn't very formal, but you will have to trust me."

Barrington moved twice up and down the room before he turned to the younger man. "Lance," he said, "when you first came here, any deal of this kind between

us would have been out of the quetsion. Now, it is only your due to tell you that I have been wrong from the beginning, and you have a good deal to forgive."

"I think we need not go into that," said Winston, with a little smile. "This is a business deal, and if it hadn't suited me I would not have made it."

He went out in another few minutes with a little strip of paper, and just before he left the Grange placed it in Maud Barrington's hands.

"You will not ask any questions, but if ever Colonel Barrington is not kind to you, you can show him that," he said.

He had gone in another moment, but the girl, comprehending dimly what he had done, stood still, staring at the paper with a warmth in her cheeks and a mistiness in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII

SERGEANT STIMSON CONFIRMS HIS SUSPICIONS

IT was late in the afternoon when Colonel Barrington drove up to Winston's homestead. He had his niece and sister with him, and when he pulled up his team, all three were glad of the little breeze that came down from the blueness of the north and rippled the whitened grass. It had blown over leagues of sun-bleached prairie, and the great desolation beyond the pines of the Saskatchewan, but had not wholly lost the faint, wholesome chill it brought from the Pole.

There was no cloud in the vault of ether, and slanting sun-rays beat fiercely down upon the prairie, until the fibrous dust grew fiery and the eyes ached from the glare of the vast stretch of silvery gray. The latter was, however, relieved by stronger color in front of the party, for blazing gold on the dazzling stubble, the oat sheaves rolled away in long rows that diminished and melted into each other, until they cut the blue of the sky in a delicate filigree. Oats had moved up in value in sympathy with wheat, and the good soil had most abundantly redeemed its promise that year. Colonel Barrington, however, sighed a little as he looked at them, and remembered that such a harvest might have been his.

"We will get down and walk towards the wheat," he said. "It is a good crop and Lance is to be envied."

"Still," said Miss Barrington, "he deserved it, and those sheaves stand for more than the toil that brought them there."

"Of course!" said the Colonel, with a curious little smile. "For rashness, I fancied, when they showed the first blade above the clod, but I am less sure of it now. Well, the wheat is even finer."

A man who came up took charge of the horses, and the party walked in silence towards the wheat. It stretched before them in a vast parallelogram, and while the oats were the pale gold of the austral, there was the tint of the ruddier metal of their own Northwest in this. It stood tall and stately, murmuring as the sea does, until it rolled before a stronger puff of breeze in waves of ochre, through which the warm bronze gleamed when its rhythmic patter swelled into deeper-toned harmonies. There was that in the elfin music and blaze of color which appealed to the sensual ear and eye, and something which struck deeper still, as it did in the days men poured libations on the fruitful soil, and white-robed priests blessed it, when the world was young.

Maud Barrington felt it vaguely, but she recognized more clearly, as her aunt had done, the faith and daring of the sower. The earth was very bountiful, but that wheat had not come there of itself; and she knew the man who had called it up and had done more than bear his share of the primeval curse which, however, was apparently more or less evaded at Silverdale. Even when the issue appeared hopeless, the courage that held him resolute in the face of others' fears, and the greatness of his projects, had appealed to her, and it almost counted for less that he had achieved success. Then glancing further across the billowing grain she saw him—still, as it seemed it had always been with him, amid the stress and dust of strenuous endeavor.

Once more, as she had seen them when the furrows were bare at seed time, and there was apparently only

ruin in store for those who raised the Eastern people's bread, lines of dusty teams came plodding down the rise. They advanced in echelon, keeping their time and distance with a military precision, but in place of the harrows, the tossing arms of the binders flashed and swung. The wheat went down before them, their wake was strewn with gleaming sheaves, and one man came foremost swaying in the driving-seat of a rattling machine. His face was the color of a Blackfeet's, and she could see the darkness of his neck above the loose-fronted shirt, and a bare blackened arm that was raised to hold the tired beasts to their task. Their trampling, and the crash and rattle that swelled in slow crescendo, drowned the murmur of the wheat, until one of the machines stood still, and the leader, turning a moment in his saddle, held up a hand. Then those that came behind swung into changed formation, passed, and fell into indented line again, while Colonel Barrington nodded with grim approval.

"It is very well done," he said. "The best of harvesters! No newcomers yonder. They're capable Manitoba men. I don't know where he got them, and, in any other year, one would have wondered where he would find the means of paying them. We have never seen farming of this kind at Silverdale."

He seemed to sigh a little while his hand closed on the bridle, and Maud Barrington fancied she understood his thoughts just then.

"Nobody can be always right, and the good years do not come alone," she said. "You will plow every acre next one."

Barrington smiled dryly. "I'm afraid that will be a little late, my dear. Any one can follow, but since, when everybody's crop is good, the price comes down,

the man who gets the prize is the one who shows the way."

"He was content to face the risk," said Miss Barrington.

"Of course," said the Colonel quietly. "I should be the last to make light of his foresight and courage. Indeed, I am glad I can acknowledge it, in more ways than one, for I have felt lately that I am getting an old man. Still, there is one with greater capacities ready to step into my shoes, and though it was long before I could overcome my prejudice against him, I think I should now be content to let him have them. Whatever Lance may have been, he was born a gentleman, and blood is bound to tell."

Maud Barrington, who was of patrician parentage, and would not at one time have questioned this assertion, wondered why she felt less sure of it just then.

"But if he had not been, would not what he has done be sufficient to vouch for him?" she said.

Barrington smiled a little, and the girl felt that her question was useless as she glanced at him. He sat very straight in his saddle, immaculate in dress, with a gloved hand on his hip, and a stamp which he had inherited, with the thinly-covered pride that usually accompanies it from generations of a similar type, on his clean-cut face. It was evidently needless to look for any sympathy with that view from him.

"My dear," he said, "there are things at which the others can beat us; but, after all, I do not think they are worth the most, and while Lance has occasionally exhibited a few undesirable characteristics, no doubt acquired in this country, and has not been always blameless, the fact that he is a Courthorne at once covers and accounts for a good deal."

Then Winston recognized them, and made a sign to one of the men behind him as he hauled his binder clear of the wheat. He had dismounted in another minute, and came towards them, with the jacket he had not wholly succeeded in struggling into, loose about his shoulders.

"It is almost time I gave my team a rest," he said. "Will you come with me to the house?"

"No," said Colonel Barrington. "We only stopped in passing. The crop will harvest well."

"Yes," said Winston, turning with a little smile to Miss Barrington. "Better than I expected, and prices are still moving up. You will remember, madam, who it was wished me good fortune. It has undeniably come!"

"Then," said the white-haired lady, "next year I will do as much again, though it will be a little unnecessary, because you have my good wishes all the time. Still, you are too prosaic to fancy they can have anything to do with—this."

She pointed to the wheat, but, though Winston smiled again, there was a curious expression in his face as he glanced at her niece.

"I certainly do, and your good-will has made a greater difference than you realize to me," he said.

Miss Barrington looked at him steadily. "Lance," she said, "there is something about you and your speeches that occasionally puzzles me. Now, of course, that was the only rejoinder you could make, but I fancied you meant it."

"I did," said Winston, with a trace of grimness in his smile. "Still, isn't it better to tell any one too little rather than too much?"

"Well," said Miss Barrington, "you are going to be

franker with me by and by. Now, my brother has been endeavoring to convince us that you owe your success to qualities inherited from bygone Courthornes."

Winston did not answer for a moment, and then he laughed. "I fancy Colonel Barrington is wrong," he said. "Don't you think there are latent capabilities in every man, though only one here and there gets an opportunity of using them? In any case, wouldn't it be pleasanter for any one to feel that his virtues were his own and not those of his family?"

Miss Barrington's eyes twinkled, but she shook her head. "That," she said, "would be distinctly wrong of him, but I fancy it is time we were getting on."

In another few minutes Colonel Barrington took up the reins, and as they drove slowly past the wheat, his niece had another view of the toiling teams. They were moving on tirelessly with their leader in front of them, and the rasp of the knives, trample of hoofs, and clash of the binders' wooden arms once more stirred her. She had heard those sounds often before, and attached no significance to them, but now she knew a little of the stress and effort that preceded them, she could hear through the turmoil the exultant note of victory.

Then the wagon rolled more slowly up the rise, and had passed from view behind it, when a mounted man rode up to Winston with an envelope in his hand.

"Mr. Macdonald was in at the settlement and the telegraph clerk gave it him," he said. "He told me to come along with it."

Winston opened the message, and his face grew grim as he read, "Send me five hundred dollars. Urgent."

Then he thrust it into his pocket, and went on with his harvesting when he had thanked the man. He also worked until dusk was creeping up across the prairie be-

fore he concerned himself further about the affair, and then the note he wrote was laconic.

"Enclosed you will find fifty dollars, sent only because you may be ill. In case of necessity you can forward your doctor's or hotel bills," it ran.

It was with a wry smile he watched a man ride off towards the settlement with it. "I shall not be sorry when the climax comes," he said. "The strain is telling."

In the meanwhile Sergeant Stimson had been quietly renewing his acquaintance with certain ranchers and herders of sheep scattered across the Albertan prairie some six hundred miles away. They found him more communicative and cordial than he used to be, and with one or two he unbent so far as, in the face of the regulations, to refresh himself with whisky which had contributed nothing to the Canadian revenue. Now the lonely ranchers have as a rule few opportunities of friendly talk with anybody, and as they responded to the sergeant's geniality, he became acquainted with a good many facts, some of which confirmed certain vague suspicions of his, though others astonished him. In consequence of this he rode out one night with two or three troopers of a Western squadron.

His apparent business was somewhat prosaic. Musquash, the Blackfeet, in place of remaining quietly on his reserve, had in a state of inebriation reverted to the primitive customs of his race, and taking the trail, not only annexed some of his white neighbors' ponies and badly frightened their wives, but drove off a steer with which he feasted his people. The owner following came upon the hide, and Musquash, seeing it was too late to re-

move the brand from it, expressed his contrition, and pleaded in extenuation that he was rather worthy of sympathy than blame, because he would never have laid hands on what was not his had not a white man sold him deleterious liquor. As no white man is allowed to supply an Indian with alcohol in any form, the wardens of the prairie took a somewhat similar view of the case, and Stimson was, from motives which he did not mention, especially anxious to get his grip upon the other offender.

The night when they rode out was very dark, and they spent half of it beneath a birch bluff, seeing nothing whatever, and only hearing a coyote howl. It almost appeared there was something wrong with the information supplied them respecting the probable running of another load of prohibited whisky, and towards morning Stimson rode up to the young commissioned officer.

"The man who brought us word has either played their usual trick and sent us here while his friends take the other trail, or somebody saw us ride out and went south to tell the boys," he said. "Now, you might consider it advisable that I and one of the troopers should head for the ford at Willow Hollow, sir."

"Yes," said the young officer, who was quite aware that there were as yet many things connected with his duties he did not know. "Now I come to think of it, Sergeant, I do. We'll give you two hours, and then, if you don't turn up, ride over after you; it's condemnably shivery waiting for nothing here."

Stimson saluted and shook his bridle, and rather less than an hour later faintly discerned a rattle of wheels that rose from a long way off across the prairie. Then he used the spur, and by and by it became evident that the drumming of their horses' feet had carried far, for, though

the rattle grew a little louder, there was no doubt that whoever drove the wagon had no desire to be overtaken. Still, two horses cannot haul a vehicle over a rutted trail as fast as one can carry a man, and when the wardens of the prairie raced towards the black wall of birches that rose higher in front of them, the sound of wheels seemed very near. It, however, ceased suddenly, and was followed by a drumming that could only have been made by a galloping horse.

"One beast!" said the Sergeant. "Well, they'd have two men, any way, in that wagon. Get down and picket. We'll find the other fellow somewhere in the bluff."

They came upon him within five minutes endeavoring to cut loose the remaining horse from the entangled harness in such desperate haste that he did not hear them until Stimson grasped his shoulder.

"Hold out your hands," he said. "You have your carbine ready, trooper?"

The man made no resistance, and Stimson laughed when the handcuffs were on.

"Now," he said, "where's your partner?"

"I don't know that I mind telling you," said the prisoner. "It was a low down trick he played on me. We got down to take out the horses when we saw we couldn't get away from you, and I'd a blanket girthed round the best of them, when he said he'd hold him while I tried what I could do with the other. Well, I let him, and the first thing I knew he was off at a gallop, leaving me with the other kicking devil two men couldn't handle. You'll find him rustling south over the Montana trail."

"Mount and ride!" said Stimson, and when his companion galloped off, turned once more to his prisoner.

"You'll have a lantern somewhere, and I'd like a look at you," he said. "If you're the man I expect, I'm glad I found you."

"It's in the wagon," said the other dejectedly.

Stimson got a light, and when he had released and picketed the plunging horse, held it so that he could see his prisoner. Then he nodded with evident contentment.

"You may as well sit down. We've got to have a talk," he said.

"Well," said the other, "I'd help you to catch Harmon if I could, but I can prove he hired me to drive him over to Kemp's in the wagon, and you'd find it difficult to show I knew what there was in the packages he took along."

Stimson smiled dryly. "Still," he said, "I think it could be done, and I've another count against you. You had one or two deals with the boys some little while ago."

"I'm not afraid of your fixing up against me anything I did then," said the other man.

"No?" said Stimson. "Now, I guess you're wrong, and it might be a good deal more serious than whisky-running. One night a man crawled up to your homestead through the snow, and you took him in."

He saw the sudden fear in his companion's face before he turned it from the lantern.

"It has happened quite a few times," said the latter. "We don't turn any stranger out in this country."

"Of course!" said the Sergeant gravely, though he felt a little thrill of content as he saw the shot, he had been by no means sure of, had told. "That man, however, had lost his horse in the river, and it was the one he got from you that took him out of the country. Now,

if we could show you knew what he had done, it might go as far as hanging somebody."

The man was evidently not a confirmed law breaker, but merely one of the small farmers who were willing to pick up a few dollars by assisting the whisky-runners now and then, and he abandoned all resistance.

"Sergeant," he said, "it was 'most a week before I knew, and if anybody had told me at the time, I'd have turned him out to freeze before I'd have let him have a horse of mine."

"That wouldn't go very far if we brought the charge against you," said Stimson grimly. "If you'd sent us word when you did know, we'd have had him."

"Well," said the man, "he was across the frontier by that time, and I don't know that most folks would have done it, if they'd had the warning the boys sent me."

Stimson appeared to consider for almost a minute, and then gravely rapped his companion's arm.

"It seems to me that the sooner you and I have an understanding, the better it will be for you," he said.

They were some time arriving at it, and the Sergeant's superiors might not have been pleased with all he promised during the discussion. Still, he was flying at higher game, and had to sacrifice a little, while he knew his man.

"We'll fix it up without you, as far as we can, but if we want you to give evidence that the man who lost his horse in the river was not farmer Winston, we'll know where to find you," he said. "You'll have to take your chance of being tried with him if we find you're trying to get out of the country."

It was half an hour later when the rest of the troopers arrived and Stimson had some talk with their officer aside.

"A little out of the usual course, isn't it?" said the latter. "I don't know that I'd have countenanced it, so to speak, off my own bat at all, but I had a tolerably plain hint that you were to use your discretion over this affair. After all, one has to stretch a point or two occasionally."

"Yes, sir," said Stimson. "A good many now and then."

The officer smiled a little and went back to the rest. "Two of you will ride after the other rascal," he said. "Now, look here, my man, the first time my troopers, who'll call round quite frequently, don't find you about your homestead, you'll land yourself in a tolerably serious difficulty. In the meanwhile, I'm sorry we can't bring a charge of whisky-running against you, but another time be careful who you hire your wagon to."

Then there was a rapid drumming of hoofs as two troopers went off at a gallop, while when the rest turned back towards the outpost Stimson rode with them quietly content.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REVELATION

WINSTON'S harvesting prospered as his sowing had done, for by day the bright sunshine shone down on standing wheat and lengthening rows of sheaves. It was in the bracing cold of sunrise the work began, and the first pale stars were out before the tired men and jaded horses dragged themselves home again. Not infrequently it happened that the men wore out the teams and machines, but there was no stoppage then, for fresh horses were led out from the corral or a new binder was ready. Every minute was worth a dollar, and Winston, who had apparently foreseen and provided for everything, wasted none.

Then, for wheat is seldom stacked in that country, as the days grew shorter and the evenings cool, the smoke of the big thrasher streaked the harvest field, and the wagons went jolting between humming separator and granary, until the later was gorged to repletion and the wheat was stored within a willow framing beneath the chaff and straw that streamed from the chute of the great machine. Winston had around him the best men that dollars could hire, and toiled tirelessly with the grimy host in the whirling dust of the thrasher and amid the sheaves, wherever another pair of hands, or the quick decision that would save an hour's delay, was needed most.

As compared with the practice of insular Britain, there were not half enough of them, but wages are high in that country, and the crew of the thrasher paid by the

bushel, while the rest had long worked for their own hand on the levels of Manitoba and in the bush of Ontario, and knew that the sooner their toil was over the sooner they would go home again with well-lined pockets. So, generously fed, splendid human muscle kept pace with clinking steel under a stress that is seldom borne outside the sun-bleached prairie at harvest time, and Winston forgot everything save the constant need for the utmost effort of body and brain. It was even of little import to him that prices moved steadily upward as he toiled.

At last it was finished, and only knee-high stubble covered his land and that of Maud Barrington, while, for he was one who could venture fearlessly and still know when he had risked enough, soon after it was thrashed out the wheat was sold. The harvesters went home with enough to maintain them through the winter, and Winston, who spent two days counting his gain, wrote asking Graham to send him an accountant from Winnipeg. With him he spent a couple more days, and then, with an effort he was never to forget, prepared himself for the reckoning. It was time to fling off the mask before the eyes of all who had trusted him.

He had thought it over carefully, and his first decision had been to make the revelation to Colonel Barrington alone. That, however, would, he felt, be too simple, and his pride rebelled against anything that would stamp him as one who dare not face the men he had deceived. One by one they had tacitly offered him their friendship and then their esteem, until he knew that he was virtually leader at Silverdale, and it seemed fitting that he should admit the wrong he had done them, and bear the obloquy, before them all. For a while the thought of Maud Barrington restrained him, and then

he brushed that aside. He had fancied with masculine blindness that what he felt for her had been well concealed, and that her attitude to him could be no more than kindly sympathy with one who was endeavoring to atone for a discreditable past. Her anger and astonishment would be hard to bear, but once more his pride prompted him, and he decided that she should at least see he had the courage to face the results of his wrongdoing. As it happened, he was given an opportunity, when he was invited to the harvest celebration that was held each year at Silverdale.

It was a still, cool evening when every man of the community, and most of the women, gathered in the big dining-room of the Grange. The windows were shut now, for the chill of the early frost was on the prairie, and the great lamps burned steadily above the long tables. Cut glass, dainty china and silver gleamed beneath them amidst the ears of wheat that stood in clusters for sole and appropriate ornamentation. They merited the place of honor, for wheat had brought prosperity to every man at Silverdale who had had the faith to sow that year.

On either hand were rows of smiling faces, the men's burned and bronzed, the women's kissed into faintly warmer color by the sun, and white shoulders shone amidst the somberly covered ones, while here and there a diamond gleamed on a snowy neck. Barrington sat at the head of the longest table, with his niece and sister, Dane and his oldest followers about him, and Winston at its foot, dressed very simply after the usual fashion of the prairie farmers. There were few in the company who had not noticed this, though they did not as yet understand its purport.

Nothing happened during dinner, but Maud Barring-

ton noticed that, although some of his younger neighbors rallied him, Winston was grimly quiet. When it was over, Barrington rose, and the men who knew the care he had borne that year never paid him more willing homage than they did when he stood smiling down on them. As usual he was immaculate in dress, erect, and quietly commanding, but in spite of its smile his face seemed worn, and there were thickening wrinkles, which told of anxiety, about his eyes.

"Another year has gone, and we have met again to celebrate with gratefulness the fulfillment of the promise made when the world was young," he said. "We do well to be thankful, but I think humility becomes us too. While we doubted the sun and the rain have been with us for a sign that, though men grow faint-hearted and spare their toil, seed-time and harvest shall not fail."

It was the first time Colonel Barrington had spoken in quite that strain, and when he paused a moment there was a curious stillness, for those who heard him noticed an unusual tremor in his voice. There was also a gravity that was not far removed from sadness in his face when he went on again, but the intentness of his retainers would have been greater had they known that two separate detachments of police troopers were then riding toward Silverdale.

"The year has brought its changes, and set its mark deeply on some of us," he said. "We cannot recall it, or retrieve our blunders, but we can hope they will be forgiven us and endeavor to avoid them again. This is not the fashion in which I had meant to speak to you tonight, but after the bounty showered upon us I feel my responsibility. The law is unchangeable. The man who would have bread to eat or sell must toil for it, and I, in disregard of it, bade you hold your hand. Well, we

have had our lesson, and we will be wiser another time, but I have felt that my usefulness as your leader is slipping away from me. This year has shown me that I am getting an old man."

Dane kicked the foot of a lad beside him, and glanced at the piano as he stood up.

"Sir," he said simply, "although we have differed about trifles and may do so again, we don't want a better one—and if we did we couldn't find him."

A chord from the piano rang through the approving murmurs, and the company rose to their feet before the lad had beaten out the first bar of the jingling rhythm. Then the voices took it up, and the great hall shook to the rafters with the last "Nobody can deny."

Trite as it was, Barrington saw the darker flush in the bronzed faces, and there was a shade of warmer color in his own as he went on again.

"The things one feels the most are those one can least express, and I will not try to tell you how I value your confidence," he said. "Still, the fact remains that sooner or later I must let the reins fall into younger hands, and there is a man here who will, I fancy, lead you farther than you would ever go with me. Times change, and he can teach you how those who would do the most for the Dominion need live to-day. He is also, and I am glad of it, one of us, for traditions do not wholly lose their force and we know that blood will tell. That this year has not ended in disaster irretrievable is due to our latest comrade, Lance Courthorne."

This time there were no musical honors or need of them, for a shout went up that called forth an answering rattle from the cedar paneling. It was flung back from table to table up and down the great room, and when

the men sat down, flushed and breathless, their eyes still shining, the one they admitted had saved Silverdale rose up quietly at the foot of the table. The hand he laid on the snowy cloth shook a little, and the bronze that generally suffused it was less noticeable in his face. All who saw it felt that something unusual was coming, and Maud Barrington leaned forward a trifle, with a curious throbbing of her heart.

"Comrades! It is, I think, the last time you will hear the term from me," he said. "I am glad that we have made and won a good fight at Silverdale, because it may soften your most warranted resentment when you think of me."

Every eye was turned upon him, and an expression of bewilderment crept into the faces, while a lad who sat next to him touched his arm reassuringly.

"You'll feel your feet in a moment, but that's a curious fashion of putting it," he said.

Winston turned to Barrington, and stood silent a moment. He saw Maud Barrington's face showing strained and intent, but less bewildered than the others, and that of her aunt, which seemed curiously impassive, and a little thrill ran through him. It passed, and once more he only saw the leader of Silverdale.

"Sir," he said, "I did you a wrong when I came here, and with your convictions you would never tolerate me as your successor."

There was a rustle of fabric as some of the women moved, and a murmur of uncontrollable astonishment, while those who noticed it, remembered Barrington's gasp. It expressed absolute bewilderment, but in another moment he smiled.

"Sit down, Lance," he said. "You need make no speeches. We expect better things from you."

Winston stood very still. "It was the simple truth I told you, sir," he said. "Don't make it too hard for me."

Just then there was a disturbance at the rear of the room, and a man, who shook off the grasp of one that followed him, came in. He moved forward with uneven steps, and then, resting his hand on a chair back, faced about and looked at Winston. The dust was thick upon his clothes, but it was his face that seized and held attention. It was horribly pallid, save for the flush that showed in either cheek, and his half-closed eyes were dazed.

"I heard them cheering," he said. "Couldn't find you at your homestead. You should have sent the five hundred dollars. They would have saved you this."

The defective utterance would alone have attracted attention, and, with the man's attitude, was very significant, but it was equally evident to most of those who watched him that he was also struggling with some infirmity. Western hospitality has, however, no limit, and one of the younger men drew out a chair.

"Hadn't you better sit down, and if you want anything to eat we'll get it you," he said. "Then you can tell us what your errand is."

The man made a gesture of negation, and pointed to Winston.

"I came to find a friend of mine. They told me at his homestead that he was here," he said.

There was an impressive silence, until Colonel Barrington glanced at Winston, who still stood quietly impassive at the foot of the table.

"You know our visitor?" he said. "The Grange is large enough to give a stranger shelter."

The man laughed. "Of course he does; it's my place he's living in."

Barrington turned again to Winston, and his face seemed to have grown a trifle stern.

"Who is this man?" he said.

Winston looked steadily in front of him, vacantly noticing the rows of faces turned towards him under the big lamps. "If he had waited a few minutes longer, you would have known," he said. "He is Lance Courthorne."

This time the murmurs implied incredulity, but the man who stood swaying a little with his hand on the chair, and a smile in his half-closed eyes, made an ironical inclination.

"It's evident you don't believe it or wish to. Still, it's true," he said.

One of the men nearest him rose and quietly thrust him into the chair.

"Sit down in the meanwhile," he said dryly. "By and by, Colonel Barrington will talk to you."

Barrington thanked him with a gesture, and glanced at the rest. "One would have preferred to carry out this inquiry more privately," he said, very slowly, but with hoarse distinctness. "Still, you have already heard so much."

Dane nodded. "I fancy you are right, sir. Because we have known and respected the man who has, at least, done a good deal for us, it would be better that we should hear the rest."

Barrington made a little gesture of agreement, and once more fixed his eyes on Winston. "Then will you tell us who you are?"

"A struggling prairie farmer," said Winston quietly. "The son of an English country doctor who died in

penury, and one who from your point of view could never have been entitled to more than courteous toleration from any of you."

He stopped, but, for the astonishment was passing, there was negation in the murmurs which followed, while somebody said, "Go on!"

Dane stood up. "I fancy our comrade is mistaken," he said. "Whatever he may have been, we recognize our debt to him. Still, I think he owes us a more complete explanation."

Then Maud Barrington, sitting where all could see her, signed imperiously to Alfreton, who was on his feet next moment, with Macdonald and more of the men following him.

"I," he said, with a little ring in his voice and a flush in his young face, "owe him everything, and I'm not the only one. This, it seems to me, is the time to acknowledge it."

Barrington checked him with a gesture. "Sit down, all of you. Painful and embarrassing as it is, now we have gone so far, this affair must be elucidated. It would be better if you told us more."

Winston drew back a chair, and when Courthorne moved, the man who sat next to him laid a grasp on his arm. "You will oblige me by not making any remarks just now," he said dryly. "When Colonel Barrington wants to hear anything from you he'll ask you."

"There is little more," said Winston. "I could see no hope in the old country, and came out to this one with one hundred pounds a distant connection lent me. That sum will not go very far anywhere, as I found when, after working for other men, I bought stock and took up Government land. To hear how I tried to do three men's work for six weary years, and at times went for months

together half-fed, might not interest you, though it has its bearing on what came after. The seasons were against me, and I had not the dollars to tide me over the time of drought and blizzard until a good one came. Still, though my stock died, and I could scarcely haul in the little wheat the frost and hail left me, with my worn-out team, I held on, feeling that I could achieve prosperity if I once had the chances of other men."

He stopped a moment, and Macdonald poured out a glass of wine and passed it across to him in a fashion that made the significance of what he did evident.

"We know what kind of a struggle you made by what we have seen at Silverdale," he said.

Winston put the glass aside, and turned once more to Colonel Barrington.

"Still," he said, "until Courthorne crossed my path, I had done no wrong, and I was in dire need of the money that tempted me to take his offer. He made a bargain with me that I should ride his horse and personate him, that the police troopers might leave him unsuspected to lead his comrades running whisky, while they followed me. I kept my part of the bargain, and it cost me what I fancy I can never recover, unless the trial I shall shortly face will take the stain from me. While I passed for him your lawyer found me, and I had no choice between being condemned as a criminal for what Courthorne had in the meanwhile done, or continuing the deception. He had, as soon as I had left him, taken my horse and garments, so that if seen by the police they would charge me. I could not take your money, but, though Courthorne was apparently drowned, I did wrong when I came to Silverdale. For a time the opportunities dazzled me; ambition drew me on, and I knew what I could do."

He stopped again, and once more there was a soft rustle of dresses, and a murmur, as those who listened gave inarticulate expression to their feelings. Moving a little, he looked steadily at Maud Barrington and her aunt, who sat close together.

"Then," he said, very slowly, "it was borne in upon me that I could not persist in deceiving you. Courthorne, I fancied, could not return to trouble me, but the confidence that little by little you placed in me rendered it out of the question. Still, I saw that I could save some at least at Silverdale from drifting to disaster, and there was work for me here which would go a little way in reparation, and now that it is done I was about to bid you good-by, and ask you not to think too hardly of me."

There was a moment's intense silence until once more Dane rose up, and pointed to Courthorne sitting with half-closed eyes, dusty, partly dazed by indulgence, and with the stamp of dissolute living on him, in his chair. Then he glanced at Winston's bronzed face, which showed quietly resolute at the bottom of the table.

"Whatever we would spare you and ourselves, sir, we must face the truth," he said. "Which of these men was needed at Silverdale?"

Again the murmurs rose up, but Winston sat silent, his pulses throbbing with a curious exultation. He had seen the color creep into Maud Barrington's face, and her aunt's eyes, when he told her what had prompted him to leave Silverdale, and knew they understood him. Then, in the stillness that followed, the drumming of hoofs rose from the prairie. It grew louder, and when another sound became audible too, more than one of those who listened recognized the jingle of accoutre-

ments. Courthorne rose unsteadily, and made for the door.

"I think," he said, with a curious laugh, "I must be going. I don't know whether the troopers want me or your comrade."

A lad sprang to his feet, and as he ran to the door called "Stop him!"

In another moment Dane had caught his arm, and his voice rang through the confusion as everybody turned or rose.

"Keep back all of you," he said. "Let him go!"

Courthorne was outside by this time, and only those who reached the door before Dane closed it heard a faint beat of hoofs as somebody rode quietly away beneath the bluff, while as the rest clustered together, wondering, a minute or two later, Corporal Payne, flecked with spume and covered with dust, came in. He raised his hand in salutation to Colonel Barrington, who sat very grim in face in his chair at the head of the table.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's my duty to apprehend Lance Courthorne," he said.

"You have a warrant?" asked Barrington.

"Yes, sir," said the corporal.

There was intense silence for a moment. Then the Colonel's voice broke through it very quietly.

"He is not here," he said.

Payne made a little deprecatory gesture. "We know he came here. It is my duty to warn you that proceedings will be taken against any one concealing or harboring him."

Barrington rose up very stiffly, with a little gray tinge in his face, but words seemed to fail him, and Dane laid his hand on the corporal's shoulder.

"Then," he said grimly, "don't exceed it. If you believe he's here, we will give you every opportunity of finding him."

Payne called to a comrade outside, who was, as it happened, new to the force, and they spent at least ten minutes questioning the servants and going up and down the house. Then as they glanced into the general room again, the trooper looked deprecatingly at his officer.

"I fancied I heard somebody riding by the bluff just before we reached the house," he said.

Payne wheeled round with a flash in his eyes. "Then you have lost us our man. Out with you, and tell Jackson to try the bluff for a trail."

They had gone in another moment, and Winston still sat at the foot of the table and Barrington at the head, while the rest of the company were scattered, some wonderingly silent, though others talked in whispers, about the room. As yet they felt only consternation and astonishment.

CHAPTER XXV

COURTHORNE MAKES REPARATION

THE silence in the big room had grown oppressive, when Barrington raised his head and sat stiffly upright.

"What has happened has been a blow to me, and I am afraid I am scarcely equal to entertaining you to-night," he said. "I should, however, like Dane and Macdonald, and one or two of the older men to stay a while. There is still, I fancy, a good deal for us to do."

The others turned towards the door, but as they passed Winston, Miss Barrington turned and touched his shoulder. The man, looking up suddenly, saw her and her niece standing close beside her.

"Madam," he said hoarsely, though it was Maud Barrington he glanced at, "the comedy is over. Well, I promised you an explanation, and now you have it you will try not to think too bitterly of me. I cannot ask you to forgive me."

The little white-haired lady pointed to the ears of wheat which stood gleaming ruddy bronze in front of him.

"That," she said, very quietly, "will make it easier."

Maud Barrington said nothing, but every one in the room saw her standing a moment beside the man, with a little flush on her face and no blame in her eyes. Then she passed on, but short as it was the pause had been very significant, for it seemed that whatever the elders

of the community might decide, the two women, whose influence was supreme at Silverdale, had given the impostor absolution.

The girl could not analyze her feelings, but through them all a vague relief was uppermost, for whatever he had been it was evident the man had done one wrong only, and daringly, and that was a good deal easier to forgive than several incidents in Courthorne's past would have been. Then she was conscious that Miss Barrington's eyes were upon her.

"Aunt," she said, with a little tremor in her voice, "it is almost bewildering. Still, one seemed to feel that what that man has done could never have been the work of Lance Courthorne."

Miss Barrington made no answer, but her face was very grave, and just then those nearest it drew back a little from the door. A trooper stood outside it, his carbine glinting in the light, and another was silhouetted against the sky, sitting motionless in his saddle further back on the prairie.

"The police are still here," said somebody.

One by one they passed out under the trooper's gaze, but there was the usual delay in harnessing and saddling, and the first vehicle had scarcely rolled away, when again the beat of hoofs and thin jingle of steel came portentously out of the silence. Maud Barrington shivered a little as she heard it.

In the meanwhile, the few who remained had seated themselves about Colonel Barrington. When there was quietness again, he glanced at Winston, who still sat at the foot of the table.

"Have you anything more to tell us?" he asked. "These gentlemen are here to advise me if necessary."

"Yes," said Winston quietly. "I shall probably

leave Silverdale before morning, and have now to hand you a statement of my agreement with Courthorne and the result of my farming here, drawn up by a Winnipeg accountant. Here is also a document in which I have taken the liberty of making you and Dane my assigns. You will, as authorized by it, pay to Courthorne the sum due to him, and with your consent, which you have power to withhold, I purpose taking one thousand dollars only of the balance that remains to me. I have it here now, and in the meanwhile surrender it to you. Of the rest, you will make whatever use that appears desirable for the general benefit of Silverdale. Courthorne has absolutely no claim upon it."

He laid a wallet on the table, and Dane glanced at Colonel Barrington, who nodded when he returned it unopened.

"We will pass it without counting. You accept the charge, sir?" he said.

"Yes," said Barrington gravely. "It seems it is forced on me. Well, we will glance through the statement."

For at least ten minutes nobody spoke, and then Dane said. "There are prairie farmers who would consider what he is leaving behind him a competence."

"If this agreement, which was apparently verbal, is confirmed by Courthorne, the entire sum rightfully belongs to the man he made his tenant," said Barrington, and Macdonald smiled gravely as he glanced at Winston.

"I think we can accept the statement that it was made without question, sir," he said.

Winston shook his head. "I claim one thousand dollars as the fee of my services, and they should be worth that much, but I will take no more."

"Are we not progressing a little too rapidly, sir?" said Dane. "It seems to me we have yet to decide whether it is necessary that the man who has done so much for us should leave Silverdale."

Winston smiled a trifle grimly. "I think," he said, "that question will very shortly be answered for you."

Macdonald held his hand up, and a rapid thud of hoofs came faintly through the silence.

"Troopers! They are coming here," he said.

"Yes," said Winston. "I fancy they will relieve you from any further difficulty."

Dane strode to one of the windows, and glanced at Colonel Barrington as he pulled back the catch. Winston, however, shook his head, and a little flush crept into Dane's bronzed face.

"Sorry. Of course you are right," he said. "It will be better that they should acquit you."

No one moved for a few more minutes, and then with a trooper behind him Sergeant Stimson came in, and laid his hand on Winston's shoulder.

"I have a warrant for your apprehension, farmer Winston," he said. "You probably know the charge against you."

"Yes," said Winston simply. "I hope to refute it. I will come with you."

He went out, and Barrington stared at the men about him. "I did not catch the name before. That was the man who shot the police trooper in Alberta?"

"No, sir," said Dane, very quietly. "Nothing would induce me to believe it of him!"

Barrington looked at him in bewilderment. "But he must have done—unless," he said, and ended with a little gasp. "Good Lord! There was the faint resemblance, and they changed horses—it is horrible."

Dane's eyes were very compassionate as he laid his hand gently on his leader's shoulder.

"Sir," he said, "you have our sympathy, and I am sorry that to offer it is all we can do. Now, I think we have stayed too long already."

They went out, and left Colonel Barrington sitting alone with a gray face at the head of the table.

It was a minute or two later when Winston swung himself into the saddle at the door of the Grange. All the vehicles had not left as yet, and there was a little murmur of sympathy when the troopers closed in about him. Still, before they rode away one of the men wheeled his horse aside, and Winston saw Maud Barrington standing bareheaded by his stirrup. The moonlight showed that her face was impassive but curiously pale.

"We could not let you go without a word, and you will come back to us with your innocence made clear," she said.

Her voice had a little ring in it that carried far, and her companions heard her. What Winston said they could not hear, and he did not remember it, but he swung his hat off, and those who saw the girl at his stirrup recognized with confusion that she alone had proclaimed her faith, while they had stood aside from him. Then the Sergeant raised his hand and the troopers rode forward with their prisoner.

In the meanwhile, Courthorne was pressing south for the American frontier, and daylight was just creeping across the prairie when the pursuers, who had found his trail and the ranch he obtained a fresh horse at, had sight of him. There were three of them, riding wearily, grimed with dust, when a lonely mounted figure showed for a moment on the crest of a rise. In another minute

it dipped into a hollow, and Corporal Payne smiled grimly.

"I think we have him now. The creek can't be far away, and he's west of the bridge," he said. "While we try to head him off you'll follow behind him, Hilton."

One trooper sent the spurs in, and, while the others swung off, rode straight on. Courthorne was at least a mile from them, but they were nearer the bridge, and Payne surmised that his jaded horse would fail him if he essayed to ford the creek and climb the farther side of the deep ravine it flowed through. They saw nothing of him when they swept across the rise, for here and there a grove of willows stretched out across the prairie from the sinuous band of trees in front of them. These marked the river hollow, and Payne, knowing that the chase might be ended in a few more minutes, did not spare the spur. He also remembered, as he tightened his grip on the bridle, the white face of Trooper Shannon flecked with the drifting snow.

The bluff that rose steadily higher came back to them, willow and straggling birch flashed by, and at last Payne drew bridle where a rutted trail wound down between the trees to the bridge in the hollow. A swift glance showed him that a mounted man could scarcely make his way between them, and he smiled dryly as he signed to his companion.

"Back your horse clear of the trail," he said, and there was a rattle as he flung his carbine across the saddle. "With Hilton behind him, he'll ride straight into our hands."

He wheeled his horse in among the birches, and then sat still, with fingers that quivered a little on the carbine-stock, until a faint drumming rose from the prairie.

"He's coming!" said the trooper. "Hilton's hanging on to him."

Payne made no answer, and the sound that rang more loudly every moment through the grayness of the early daylight was not pleasant to hear. Man's vitality is near its lowest about that hour, and the troopers had ridden furiously the long night through, while one of them, who knew Lance Courthorne, surmised that there was grim work before him. Still, though he shivered as a little chilly wind shook the birch twigs, he set his lips, and once more remembered the comrade who had ridden far and kept many a lonely vigil with him.

Then a mounted man appeared in the space between the trees. His horse was jaded, and he rode loosely, swaying once or twice in his saddle, but he came straight on, and there was a jingle and rattle as the troopers swung out into the trail. The man saw them, for he glanced over his shoulder, as if at the rider who appeared behind, and then sent the spurs in again.

"Pull him up," cried Corporal Payne, and his voice was a little strained. "Stop right where you are before we fire on you!"

The man must have seen the carbines, for he raised himself a trifle, and Payne saw his face under the flapping hat. It was drawn and gray, but there was no sign of yielding or consternation in the half-closed eyes. Then he lurched in his saddle as from exhaustion or weariness, and straightened himself again with both hands on the bridle. Payne saw his heels move and the spurs drip red, and slid his left hand further along the carbine stock. The trail was steep and narrow. A horseman could scarcely turn in it, and the stranger was coming on at a gallop.

"He will have it," said the trooper hoarsely. "If he rides one of us down he may get away."

"We have got to stop him," said Corporal Payne.

Once more the swaying man straightened himself, flung his head back, and with a little breathless laugh drove his horse furiously at Payne. He was very close now, and his face showed livid under the smearing dust, but his lips were drawn up in a little bitter smile as he rode straight upon the leveled carbines. Payne, at least, understood it, and the absence of flung-up hand or cry. Courthorne's inborn instincts were strong to the end.

There was a hoarse shout from the trooper, and no answer, and a carbine flashed. Then Courthorne loosed the bridle, reeled sideways from the saddle, rolled half round with one foot in the stirrup and his head upon the ground, and was left behind, while the riderless horse and pursuer swept past the two men who, avoiding them by a hairsbreadth, sat motionless a moment in the thin drifting smoke.

Then Corporal Payne swung himself down, and, while the trooper followed, stooped over the man who lay, a limp huddled object, in the trail. He blinked up at them out of eyes that were almost closed.

"I think you have done for me," he said.

Payne glanced at his comrade. "Push on to the settlement," he said. "They've a doctor there. Bring him and Harland the magistrate out."

The trooper seemed glad to mount and ride away, and Payne once more bent over the wounded man.

"Very sorry," he said. "Still, you see, you left me no other means of stopping you. Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

A little wry smile crept into Courthorne's face.

"Don't worry," he said. "I had no wish to wait for the jury, and you can't get at an injury that's inside me."

He said nothing more, and it seemed a very long while to Corporal Payne, and Trooper Hilton, who rejoined him, before a wagon with two men in it beside the trooper came jolting up the trail. They got out, and one of them who was busy with Courthorne for some minutes nodded to Payne.

"Any time in the next twelve hours. He may last that long," he said. "Nobody's going to worry him now, but I'll see if I can revive him a little when we get him to Adamson's. It can't be more than a league away."

They lifted Courthorne, who appeared insensible, into the wagon, and Payne signed to Trooper Hilton. "Take my horse, and tell Colonel Barrington. Let him understand there's no time to lose. Then you can bring Stimson."

The tired lad hoisted himself into his saddle, and groaned a little as he rode away, but he did his errand, and late that night Barrington and Dane drove up to a lonely homestead. A man led them into a room where a limp figure was lying on a bed.

"Been kind of sleeping most of the day, but the doctor has given him something that has wakened him," he said.

Barrington returned Payne's greeting, and sat down with Dane close beside him, while, when the wounded man raised his head, the doctor spoke softly to the magistrate from the settlement a league or two away.

"I fancy he can talk to you, but you had better be quick if you wish to ask him anything," he said.

Courthorne seemed to have heard him, for he smiled a little as he glanced at Barrington. "I'm afraid it will hurt you to hear what I have to tell this gentleman," he said. "Now, I want you to listen carefully, and every word put down. Doctor, a little more brandy."

Barrington apparently would have spoken, but, while the doctor held a glass to the bloodless lips, the magistrate, who took up a strip of paper, signed to him.

"We'll have it in due form. Give him that book, doctor," he said. "Now repeat after me, and then we'll take your testimony."

It was done, and a flicker of irony showed in Courthorne's half-closed eyes.

"You feel more sure of me after that?" he said, in a voice that was very faint and strained. "Still, you see, I could gain nothing by deviating from the truth now. Well, I shot Trooper Shannon. You'll have the date in the warrant. Don't know if it will seem strange to you, but I forget it. I borrowed farmer Winston's horse and rifle without his knowledge, though I had paid him a trifle to personate me and draw the troopers off the whisky-runners. That was Winston's only complicity. The troopers, who fancied they were chasing him, followed me until his horse which I was riding went through the ice, but Winston was in Montana at the time, and did not know that I was alive until a very little while ago. Now, you can straighten that up and read it out to me."

The magistrate's pen scratched noisily in the stillness of the room, but, before he had finished, Sergeant Stimson, hot and dusty, came in. Then he raised his hand, and for a while his voice rose and fell monotonously, until Courthorne nodded.

"That's all right," he said. "I'll sign."

The doctor raised him a trifle, and moistened his lips with brandy as he gave him the pen. It scratched for a moment or two, and then fell from his relaxing fingers, while the man who took the paper wrote across the foot of it, and then would have handed it to Colonel Barrington, but that Dane quietly laid his hand upon it.

"No," he said. "If you want another witness take me."

Barrington thanked him with a gesture, and Courthorne, looking round, saw Stimson.

"You have been very patient, Sergeant, and it's rough on you that the one man you can lay your hands upon is slipping away from you," he said. "You'll see by my deposition that Winston thought me as dead as the rest of you did."

Stimson nodded to the magistrate. "I heard what was read, and it is confirmed by the facts I have picked up," he said.

Then Courthorne turned to Barrington. "I sympathize with you, sir," he said. "This must be horribly mortifying, but, you see, Winston once stopped my horse backing over a bridge into a gully when just to hold his hand would have rid him of me. You will not grudge me the one good turn I have probably done any man, when I shall assuredly not have the chance of doing another."

Barrington winced a little, for he recognized the irony in the failing voice, but he rose and moved towards the bed.

"Lance," he said, a trifle hoarsely, "it is not that which makes what has happened horrible to me, and I am only glad that you have righted this man. Your father had many claims on me, and things might have

gone differently if, when you came out to Canada, I had done my duty by his son."

Courthorne smiled a little, but without bitterness. "It would have made no difference, sir, and, after all, I led the life that suited me. By and by you will be grateful to me. I sent you a man who will bring prosperity to Silverdale."

Then he turned to Stimson, and his voice sank almost beyond hearing as he said, "Sergeant, remember, Winston fancied I was dead."

He moved his head a trifle, and the doctor stooping over him signed to the rest, who went out except Barrington.

It was some hours later, and very cold, when Barrington came softly into the room where Dane lay half-asleep in a big chair. The latter glanced at him with a question in his eyes, and the Colonel nodded very gravely.

"Yes," he said. "He has slipped out of the troopers' hands and beyond our reproaches—but I think the last thing he did will count for a little."

CHAPTER XXVI

WINSTON RIDES AWAY

THE first of the snow was driving across the prairie before a bitter wind, when Maud Barrington stood by a window of the Grange looking out into the night. The double casements rattled, the curtains behind her moved with the icy draughts, until, growing weary of watching the white flakes whirl past, she drew them to and walked slowly towards a mirror. Then a faint tinge of pink crept into her cheek, and a softness that became her into her eyes. They, however, grew critical as she smoothed back a tress of lustrous hair a trifle from her forehead, straightened the laces at neck and wrist, and shook into more flowing lines the long black dress. Maud Barrington was not unduly vain, but it was some time before she seemed contented, and one would have surmised that she desired to appear her best that night.

The result was beyond cavil in its artistic simplicity, for the girl, knowing the significance that trifles have at times, had laid aside every adornment that might hint at wealth, and the somber draperies alone emphasized the polished whiteness of her face and neck. Still, and she did not know whether she was pleased or otherwise at this, the mirror had shown the stamp which revealed itself even in passive pose and poise of head. It was her birthright, and would not be disguised.

Then she drew a low chair towards the stove, and

once more the faint color crept into her face as she took up a note. It was laconic, and requested permission to call at the Grange, but Maud Barrington was not deceived, and recognized the consideration each word had cost the man who wrote it. Afterwards she glanced at her watch, raised it with a little gesture of impatience to make sure it had not stopped, and sat still, listening to the moaning of the wind, until the door opened and Miss Barrington came in. She glanced at her niece, who felt that her eyes had noticed each detail of her somewhat unusual dress, but said nothing until the younger woman turned to her.

"They would scarcely come to-night, aunt," she said.

Miss Barrington, listening a moment, heard the wind that whirled the snow about the lonely building, but smiled incredulously.

"I fancy you are wrong, and I wish my brother were here," she said. "We could not refuse Mr. Winston permission to call, but whatever passes between us will have more than its individual significance. Anything we tacitly promise, the others will agree to, and I feel the responsibility of deciding for Silverdale."

Miss Barrington went out; but her niece, who understood her smile and that she had received a warning, sat still with a strained expression in her eyes. The prosperity of Silverdale had been dear to her, but she knew she must let something that was dearer still slip away from her, or, since they must come from her, trample on her pride as she made the first advances. It seemed a very long while before there was a knocking at the outer door, and she rose with a little quiver when light steps came up the stairway.

In the meanwhile two men stood beside the stove in the hall until an English maid returned to them.

"Colonel Barrington is away, but Miss Barrington and Miss Maud are at home," she said. "Will you go forward into the morning-room when you have taken off your furs?"

"Did you know Barrington was not here?" asked Winston, when the maid moved away.

Dane appeared embarrassed. "The fact is, I did."

"Then," said Winston dryly, "I am a little astonished you did not think fit to tell me."

Dane's face flushed, but he laid his hand on his comrade's arm. "No," he said, "I didn't. Now, listen to me for the last time, Winston. I've not been blind, you see, and, as I told you, your comrades have decided that they wish you to stay. Can't you sink your confounded pride, and take what is offered you?"

Winston shook his grasp off, and there was weariness in his face. "You need not go through it all again. I made my decision a long while ago."

"Well," said Dane, with a gesture of hopelessness, "I've done all I could, and, since you are going on, I'll look at that trace clip while you tell Miss Barrington. I mean the younger one."

"The harness can wait," said Winston. "You are coming with me."

A little grim smile crept into Dane's eyes. "I am not. I wouldn't raise a finger to help you now," he said, and retreated hastily.

It was five minutes later when Winston walked quietly into Maud Barrington's presence, and sat down when the girl signed to him. He wondered if she guessed how his heart was beating.

"It is very good of you to receive me, but I felt I could not slip away without acknowledging the kindness

you and Miss Barrington have shown me," he said. "I did not know Colonel Barrington was away."

The girl smiled a little. "Or you would not have come? Then we should have had no opportunity of congratulating you on your triumphant acquittal. You see, it must be mentioned."

"I'm afraid there was a miscarriage of justice," said Winston quietly. "Still, though it is a difficult subject, the deposition of the man I supplanted went a long way, and the police did not seem desirous of pressing a charge against me. Perhaps I should have insisted on implicating myself, but you would scarcely have looked for that after what you now know of me."

Maud Barrington braced herself for an effort, though she was outwardly very calm. "No," she said, "no one would have looked for it from any man placed as you were, and you are purposing to do more than is required of you. Why will you go away?"

"I am a poor man," said Winston. "One must have means to live at Silverdale!"

"Then," said the girl with a soft laugh which cost her a good deal, "it is because you prefer poverty, and you have at least one opportunity at Silverdale. Courthorne's land was mine to all intents and purposes before it was his, and now it reverts to me. I owe him nothing, and he did not give it me. Will you stay and farm it on whatever arrangement Dane and Macdonald may consider equitable? My uncle's hands are too full for him to attempt it."

"No," said Winston, and his voice trembled a little. "Your friends would resent it."

"Then," said the girl, "why have they urged you to stay?"

"A generous impulse. They would repent of it by

and by. I am not one of them, and they know it, now, as I did at the beginning. No doubt they would be courteous, but you see a half-contemptuous toleration would gall me."

There was a little smile on Maud Barrington's lips, but it was not in keeping with the tinge in her cheek and the flash in her eyes.

"I once told you that you were poor at subterfuge, and you know you are wronging them," she said. "You also know that even if they were hostile to you, you could stay and compel them to acknowledge you. I fancy you once admitted as much to me. What has become of the pride of the democracy you showed me?"

Winston made a deprecatory gesture. "You must have laughed at me. I had not been long at Silverdale then," he said dryly. "I should feel very lonely now. One man against long generations. Wouldn't it be a trifle unequal?"

Maud Barrington smiled again. "I did not laugh, and this is not England, though what you consider prejudices do not count for so much as they used to there, while there is, one is told quite frequently, no limit to what a man may attain to here, if he dares sufficiently."

A little quiver ran through Winston, and he rose and stood looking down on her, with one brown hand clenched on the table and the veins showing on his forehead.

"You would have me stay?" he said.

Maud Barrington met his eyes, for the spirit that was in her was the equal of his. "I would have you be yourself—what you were when you came here in defiance of Colonel Barrington, and again when you sowed the last acre of Courthorne's land, while my friends, who are yours too, looked on wondering. Then you would

stay—if it pleased you. Where has your splendid audacity gone?"

Winston slowly straightened himself, and the girl noticed the damp the struggle had brought there on his forehead, for he understood that if he would stretch out his hand and take it what he longed for might be his.

"I do not know, any more than I know where it came from, for until I met Courthorne I had never made a big venture in my life," he said. "It seems it has served its turn and left me—for now there are things I am afraid to do."

"So you will go away and forget us?"

Winston stood very still a moment, and the girl, who felt her heart beating, noticed that his face was drawn. Still, she could go no further. Then he said very slowly, "I should be under the shadow always if I stay, and my friends would feel it even more deeply than I would do. I may win the right to come back again if I go away."

Maud Barrington made no answer, but both knew no further word could be spoken on that subject until, if fate ever willed it, the man returned again, and it was a relief when Miss Barrington came in with Dane. He glanced at his comrade keenly, and then seeing the grimness in his face, quietly declined the white-haired lady's offer of hospitality. Five minutes later the farewells were said, and Maud Barrington stood with the stinging flakes whirling about her in the doorway, while the sleigh slid out into the filmy whiteness that drove across the prairie. When it vanished, she turned back into the warmth and brightness with a little shiver and one hand tightly closed.

The great room seemed very lonely when, while the

wind moaned outside, she and her aunt sat down to dinner. Neither of them appeared communicative, and both felt it a relief when the meal was over. Then Maud Barrington smiled curiously as she rose and stood with hands stretched out towards the stove.

"Aunt," she said. "Twoinette has twice asked me to go back to Montreal, and I think I will. The prairie is very dreary in the winter."

It was about this time when, as the whitened horses floundered through the lee of a bluff where there was shelter from the wind, the men in the sleigh found opportunity for speech.

"Now," said Dane quietly, "I know that we have lost you, for a while at least. Will you ever come back, Winston?"

Winston nodded. "Yes," he said. "When time has done its work and Colonel Barrington asks me, if I can buy land enough to give me a standing at Silverdale."

"That," said Dane, "will need a good many dollars, and you insisted on flinging those you had away. How are you going to make them?"

"I don't know," said Winston simply. "Still, by some means it will be done."

It was next day when he walked into Graham's office at Winnipeg, and laughed when the broker who shook hands passed the cigar box across to him.

"We had better understand each other first," he said. "You have heard what has happened to me and will not find me a profitable customer to-day."

"These cigars are the best in the city, or I wouldn't ask you to take one," said Graham dryly. "You understand me, any way. Wait until I tell my clerk that if anybody comes round I'm busy."

A bell rang, a little window opened and shut again, and Winston smiled over his cigar.

"I want to make thirty thousand dollars as soon as I can, and it seems to me there are going to be opportunities in this business. Do you know anybody who would take me as clerk or salesman?"

Graham did not appear astonished. "You'll scarcely make them that way if I find you a berth at fifty a month," he said.

"No," said Winston. "Still, I wouldn't purpose keeping it for more than six months or so. By that time I should know a little about the business."

"Got any money now?"

"One thousand dollars," said Winston quietly.

Graham nodded. "Smoke that cigar out, and don't worry me. I've got some thinking to do."

Winston took up a journal, and laid it down again twenty minutes later. "Well," he said, "you think it's too big a thing?"

"No," said Graham. "It depends upon the man, and it might be done. Knowing the business goes a good way, and so does having dollars in hand, but there's something that's born in one man in a thousand that goes a long way further still. I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it."

"Then," said Winston, "you have seen this thing in me?"

Graham nodded gravely. "Yes, sir, but you don't want to get proud. You had nothing to do with the getting of it. It was given you. Now, we're going to have a year that will not be forgotten by those who handle wheat and flour, and the men with the long heads will roll the money in. Well, I've no use for another clerk, and my salesman's good enough for me,

but if we can agree on the items I'll take you for a partner."

The offer was made and accepted quietly, and when a rough draft of the arrangement had been agreed upon, Graham nodded as he lighted another cigar.

"You may as well take hold at once, and there's work ready now," he said. "You've heard of the old St. Louis mills back on the edge of the bush country. Never did any good. Folks who had them were short of money, and didn't know how they should be run. Well, I and two other men have bought them for a song, and, while the place is tumbling in, the plant seems good. Now, I can get hold of orders for flour when I want them, and everybody with dollars to spare will plank them right into any concern handling food-stuffs this year. You go down to-morrow with an engineer, and, when you've got the mills running and orders coming in we'll sell out to a company, if we don't want them."

Winston sat silent a space turning over a big bundle of plans and estimates. Then he said, "You'll have to lay out a pile of money."

Graham laughed. "That's going to be your affair. When you want them the dollars will be ready, and there's only one condition. Every dollar we put down has got to bring another in."

"But," said Winston, "I don't know anything about milling."

"Then," said Graham dryly, "You have got to learn. A good many men have got quite rich in this country running things they didn't know much about when they took hold of them."

"There's one more point," said Winston. "I must make those thirty thousand dollars soon or they'll be no

great use to me, and when I have them I may want to leave you."

"That's all right," said Graham. "By the time you've done it, you'll have made sixty for me. We'll go out and have some lunch to clinch the deal if you're ready."

It might have appeared unusual in England, but it was much less so in a country where the specialization of professions is still almost unknown, and the man who can adapt himself attains ascendency, and on the morrow Winston arrived at a big wooden building beside a pine-shrouded river. It appeared falling to pieces, and the engineer looked disdainfully at some of the machinery, but, somewhat against his wishes, he sat up with his companion most of the night in a little log hotel, and orders that occasioned one of Graham's associates consternation were mailed to the city next morning. Then machines came out by the carload, and men with tools in droves. Some of them murmured mutinously when they found they were expected to do as much as their leader, who was not a tradesman, but these were forthwith sent back again, and the rest were willing to stay and earn the premium he promised them for rapid work.

Before the frost grew arctic, the building stood firm, and the hammers rang inside it night and day until, when the ice had bound the dam and lead, the fires were lighted and the trials under steam began. It cost more than water, but buyers with orders from the East were clamoring for flour just then. For a fortnight Winston snatched his food in mouthfuls, and scarcely closed his eyes, while Graham found him pale and almost haggard when he came down with several men from the cities in response to a telegram. For an hour they moved

up and down, watching whirring belt and humming roller, and then, whitened with the dust, stood very intent and quiet while one of them dipped up a little flour from the delivery hopper. His opinions on, and dealings in, that product were famous in the land. He said nothing for several minutes, and then brushing the white dust from his hands turned with a little smile to Graham.

"We'll have some baked, but I don't know that there's much use for it. This will grade a very good first," he said. "You can book me the thousand two eighties for a beginning now."

Winston's fingers trembled, but there was a twinkle in Graham's eyes as he brought his hand down on his shoulder.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I was figuring right on this when I brought the champagne along. It was all I could do, but Imperial Tokay wouldn't be good enough to rinse this dust down with, when every speck of it that's on you means dollars by the handful rolling in."

It was a very contented and slightly hilarious party that went back to the city, but Winston sat down before a shaded lamp with a wet rag round his head when they left him, and bent over a sheaf of drawings until his eyes grew dim. Then he once more took up a little strip of paper that Graham had given him, and leaned forward with his arms upon the table. The mill was very silent at last, for of all who had toiled in it that day one weary man alone sat awake, staring, with aching eyes, in front of him. There was, however, a little smile in them, for roseate visions floated before them. If the promise that strip of paper held out was redeemed, they might materialize, for those who had toiled and

wasted their substance that the eastern peoples might be fed would that year, at least, not go without their reward. Then he stretched out his arms wearily above his head.

"It almost seems that what I have hoped for may be mine," he said. "Still, there is a good deal to be done first, and not two hours left before I begin it to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVII

REINSTATEMENT

A YEAR of tireless effort and some anxiety had passed since Winston had seen the first load of flour sent to the east, when he and Graham sat talking in their Winnipeg office. The products of the St. Louis mills were already in growing demand, and Graham appeared quietly contented as he turned over the letters before him. When he laid down the last one, however, he glanced at his companion somewhat anxiously.

"We have got to fix up something soon," he said. "I have booked all the St. Louis can turn out for six months ahead, and the syndicate is ready to take the business over, though I don't quite know whether it would be wise to let them. It seems to me that milling is going to pay tolerably well for another year, and if I knew what you were wanting, it would suit me better."

"I told you I wanted thirty thousand dollars," said Winston quietly.

"You've got them," said Graham. "When the next balance comes out you'll have a good many more. The question is, what you're going to do with them now they're yours?"

Winston took out a letter from Dane and passed it across to Graham.

"I'm sorry to tell you the Colonel is getting no better," it ran. "The specialist we brought in seems to think he will never be quite himself again, and, now he has let the reins go, things are falling to pieces at

Silverdale. Somebody left Atterly a pile of money, and he is going back to the old country. Carshalton is going too, and, as they can't sell out to any one we don't approve of, the rest insisted on me seeing you. I purpose starting to-morrow."

"What happened to Colonel Barrington?" asked Graham.

"His sleigh turned over," said Winston. "Horse trampled on him, and it was an hour or two before his hired man could get him under shelter!"

"You would be content to turn farmer again?"

"I think I would," said Winston. "At least, at Silverdale."

Graham made a little grimace. "Well," he said resignedly, "I guess it's human nature, but I'm thankful now and then there's nothing about me but my money that would take the eye of any young woman. I figure they're kind of useful to wake up a man so he'll stir round looking for something to offer one of them, but he's apt to find his business must go second when she has got it and him, and he has to waste on house fixings what would give a man a fair start in life. Still, it's no use talking. What have you told him?"

Winston laughed a little. "Nothing," he said. "I will let him come, and you shall have my decision when I've been to Silverdale."

It was next day when Dane arrived at Winnipeg, and Winston listened gravely to all he had to tell him.

"I have two questions to ask," he said. "Would the others be unanimous in receiving me, and does Colonel Barrington know of your mission?"

"Yes to both," said Dane. "We haven't a man there who would not hold out his hand to you, and Barrington has been worrying and talking a good deal

about you lately. He seems to fancy nothing has gone right at Silverdale since you left it, and others share his opinion. The fact is, the old man is losing his grip tolerably rapidly."

"Then," said Winston quietly, "I'll go down with you, but I can make no promise until I have heard the others."

Dane smiled a little. "That is all I want. I don't know whether I told you that Maud Barrington is there. Would to-morrow suit you?"

"No," said Winston. "I will come to-day."

It was early next morning when they stepped out of the stove-warmed car into the stinging cold of the prairie. Fur-clad figures, showing shapeless in the creeping light, clustered about them, and Winston felt himself thumped on the shoulders by mittened hands, while Alfreton's young voice broke through the murmurs of welcome.

"Let him alone while he's hungry," he said. "It's the first time in its history they've had breakfast ready at this hour in the hotel, and it would not have been accomplished if I hadn't spent most of yesterday playing cards with the man who keeps it, and making love to the young women!"

"That's quite right," said another lad. "When he takes his cap off you'll see how one of them rewarded him, but come along, Winston. It—is—ready."

The greetings might, of course, have been expressed differently, but Winston also was not addicted to displaying all he felt, and the little ring in the lads' voices was enough for him. As they moved towards the hotel he saw that Dane was looking at him.

"Well?" said the later, "you see they want you."

That was probably the most hilarious breakfast that

had ever been held in the wooden hotel, and before it was over, three of his companions had said to Winston, "Of course you'll drive in with me!"

"Boys," he said, as they put their furs on, and his voice shook a trifle, "I can't ride in with everybody who has asked me unless you dismember me."

Finally Alfreton, who was a trifle too quick for the others, got him into his sleigh, and they swept out behind a splendid team into the frozen stillness of the prairie. The white leagues rolled behind them, the cold grew intense, but while Winston was for the most part silent, and apparently preoccupied, Alfreton talked almost incessantly, and only once looked grave. That happened when Winston asked about Colonel Barrington.

The lad shook his head. "I scarcely think he will ever take hold again," he said. "You will understand me better when you see him."

They stopped a while at mid-day at an outlying farm, but Winston glanced inquiringly at Alfreton when one of the sleighs went on. The lad smiled at him.

"Yes," he said. "He is going on to tell them we have got you."

"They would have found it out in a few more hours," said Winston.

Alfreton's eyes twinkled. "No doubt they would," he said dryly. "Still, you see, somebody was offering two to one that Dane couldn't bring you, and you know we're generally keen about any kind of wager!"

The explanation, which was not quite out of keeping with the customs of the younger men at Silverdale, did not content Winston, but he said nothing. So far his return had resembled a triumph, and while the sincerity of the welcome had its effect on him, he shrank a little from what he fancied might be waiting him.

The creeping darkness found them still upon the waste, and the cold grew keener when the stars peeped out. Even sound seemed frozen, and the faint muffled beat of hoofs unreal and out of place in the icy stillness of the wilderness. Still, the horses knew they were nearing home, and swung into faster pace, while the men drew fur caps down, and the robes closer round them as the draught their passage made stung them with a cold that seemed to sear the skin where there was an inch left uncovered. Now and then a clump of willows or a birch bluff flitted out of the dimness, grew a trifle blacker, and was left behind, but there was still no sign of habitation, and Alfreton, too chilled at last to speak, passed the reins to Winston, and beat his mittened hands. Winston could scarcely grasp them, for he had lived of late in the cities, and the cold he had been sheltered from was numbing.

For another hour they slid onwards, and then a dim blur crept out of the white waste. It rose higher, cutting more blackly against the sky, and Winston recognized with a curious little quiver the birch bluff that sheltered Silverdale Grange. Then as they swept through the gloom of it, a row of ruddy lights blinked across the snow, and Winston felt his heart beat as he watched the homestead grow into form. He had first come there an impostor, and had left it an outcast, while now it was amid the acclamations of those who had once looked on him with suspicion he was coming back again.

Still, he was almost too cold for any definite feeling but the sting of the frost, and it was very stiffly he stood up, shaken by vague emotions, when at last the horses stopped. A great door swung open, somebody grasped his hand, there was a murmur of voices, and partly dazed by the change of temperature he blundered into the

warmth of the hall. The blaze of light bewildered him, and he was but dimly sensible that the men who greeted him were helping him to shake off his furs, while the next thing he was sure of was that a little white-haired lady was holding out her hand.

"We are very glad to see you back," she said, with a simplicity that yet suggested stateliness. "Your friends insisted on coming over to welcome you, and Dane will not let you keep them waiting too long. Dinner is almost ready."

Winston could not remember what he answered, but Miss Barrington smiled at him as she moved away, for the flush in his face was very eloquent. The man was very grateful for that greeting, and what it implied. It was a few minutes later when he found himself alone with Dane, who laughed softly as he nodded to him.

"You are convinced at last?" he said. "Still, there is a little more of the same thing to be faced, and, if it would relieve you, I will send for Alfreton, who has some taste in that direction, to fix that tie for you. You have been five minutes over it, and it evidently does not please you. It's the first time I've ever seen you worry about your dress."

Winston turned, and a curious smile crept into his face as he laid a lean hand that shook a little on the toilet table.

"I also think it's the first time these fingers wouldn't do what I wanted them. You can deduce what you please from that," he said.

Dane only nodded, and when they went down together laid a kindly grasp upon his comrade's arm as he led him into the great dining-room. Every man at

Silverdale was apparently there, as were most of the women, and Winston stood still a moment, very erect with shoulders square, because the posture enabled him to conceal the tremor that ran through him when he saw the smiling faces turned upon him. Then he moved slowly down the room towards Maud Barrington, and felt her hand rest for a second between his fingers, which he feared were too responsive. After that, everybody seemed to speak to him, and he was glad when he found himself sitting next to Miss Barrington at the head of the long table, with her niece opposite him.

He could not remember what he or the others talked about during the meal, but he had a vague notion that there was now and then a silence of attention when he answered a question, and that the little lady's face grew momentarily grave when, as the voices sank a trifle, he turned to her.

"I would have paid my respects to Colonel Barrington, but Dane did not consider it advisable," he said.

"No," said Miss Barrington. "He has talked a good deal about you during the last two days, but he is sleeping now, and we did not care to disturb him. I am afraid you will find a great change in him when you see him."

Winston asked no more questions on that topic until later in the evening, when he found a place apart from the rest by Miss Barrington's side. He fancied this would not have happened without her connivance, and she seemed graver than usual when he stood by her chair.

"I don't wish to pain you, but I surmise that Colonel Barrington is scarcely well enough to be consulted about anything of importance just now," he said.

Miss Barrington made a little gesture of assent. "We usually pay him the compliment, but I am almost afraid he will never make a decision of moment again."

"Then," said Winston slowly, "you stand in his place, and I fancy you know why I have come back to Silverdale. Will you listen for a very few minutes while I tell you about my parents and what my upbringing has been? I must return to Winnipeg, for a time at least, to-morrow."

Miss Barrington signed her willingness, and the man spoke rapidly with a faint trace of hoarseness. Then he looked down on her.

"Madam," he said, "I have told you everything, partly from respect for those who only by a grim sacrifice did what they could for me, and that you may realize the difference between myself and the rest at Silverdale. I want to be honest now at least, and I discovered, not without bitterness at the time, that the barriers between our castes are strong in the old country."

Miss Barrington smiled a little. "Have I ever made you feel it here?"

"No," said Winston gravely. "Still, I am going to put your forbearance to a strenuous test. I want your approval. I have a question to ask your niece to-night."

"If I withheld it?"

"It would hurt me," said Winston. "Still, I would not be astonished, and I could not blame you."

"But it would make no difference?"

"Yes," said Winston gravely. "It would, but it would not cause me to desist. Nothing would do that, if Miss Barrington can overlook the past."

The little white-haired lady smiled at him. "Then," she said, "if it is any comfort to you, you have my good wishes. I do not know what Maud's decision

will be, but that is the spirit which would have induced me to listen in times long gone by!"

She rose and left him, and it may have been by her arranging that shortly afterwards Winston found Maud Barrington passing through the dimly-lighted hall. He opened the door she moved towards a trifle, and then stood facing her, with it in his hand.

"Will you wait a moment, and then you may pass if you wish," he said. "I had one great inducement for coming here to-night. I wonder if you know what it is?"

The girl stood still and met his gaze, though, dim as the light was, the man could see the crimson in her cheeks.

"Yes," she said, very quietly.

"Then," said Winston, with a little smile, though the fingers on the door quivered visibly, "I think the audacity you once mentioned must have returned to me, for I am going to make a very great venture."

For a moment Maud Barrington turned her eyes away. "It is the daring venture that most frequently succeeds."

Then she felt the man's hand on her shoulder, and that he was compelling her to look up at him.

"It is you I came for," he said quietly. "Still, for you know the wrong I have done, I dare not urge you, and have little to offer. It is you who must give everything, if you can come down from your station and be content with mine."

"One thing," said Maud Barrington, very softly, "is, however, necessary."

"That," said Winston, "was yours ever since we spent the night in the snow."

The girl felt his grip upon her shoulder grow almost

painful, but her eyes shone softly when she lifted her head again.

"Then," she said, "what I can give is yours—and it seems you have already taken possession."

Winston drew her towards him, and it may have been by Miss Barrington's arranging that nobody entered the hall, but at last the girl glanced up at the man half-shyly as she said, "Why did you wait so long?"

"It was well worth while," said Winston. "Still, I think you know."

"Yes," said Maud Barrington softly. "Now, at least, I can tell you I am glad you went away—but if you had asked me I would have gone with you."

It was some little time later when Miss Barrington came in and, after a glance at Winston, kissed her niece. Then she turned to the man. "My brother is asking for you," she said. "Will you come up with me?"

Winston followed her, and hid his astonishment when he found Colonel Barrington lying in a big chair. His face was haggard and pale, his form seemed to have grown limp and fragile, and the hand he held out trembled.

"Lance," he said, "I am very pleased to have you home again. I hear you have done wonders in the city, but you are, I think, the first of your family who could ever make money. I have, as you will see, not been well lately."

"I am relieved to find you better than I expected, sir," said Winston quietly. "Still, I fancy you are forgetting what I told you the night I went away."

Barrington nodded, and then made a little impatient gesture. "There was something unpleasant, but my memory seems to be going, and my sister has forgiven you. I know you did a good deal for us at Silverdale,

and showed yourself a match for the best of them in the city. That pleases me. By and by, you will take hold here after me."

Winston glanced at Miss Barrington, who smiled somewhat sadly.

"I am glad you mentioned that, sir, because I purpose staying at Silverdale now," he said. "It leads up to what I have to ask you."

Barrington's perceptions seemed to grow clearer, and he asked a few pertinent questions before he nodded approbation.

"Yes," he said, "she is a good girl—a very good girl, and it would be a suitable match. I should like somebody to send for her."

Maud Barrington came in softly, with a little glow in her eyes and a flush on her face, and Barrington smiled at her.

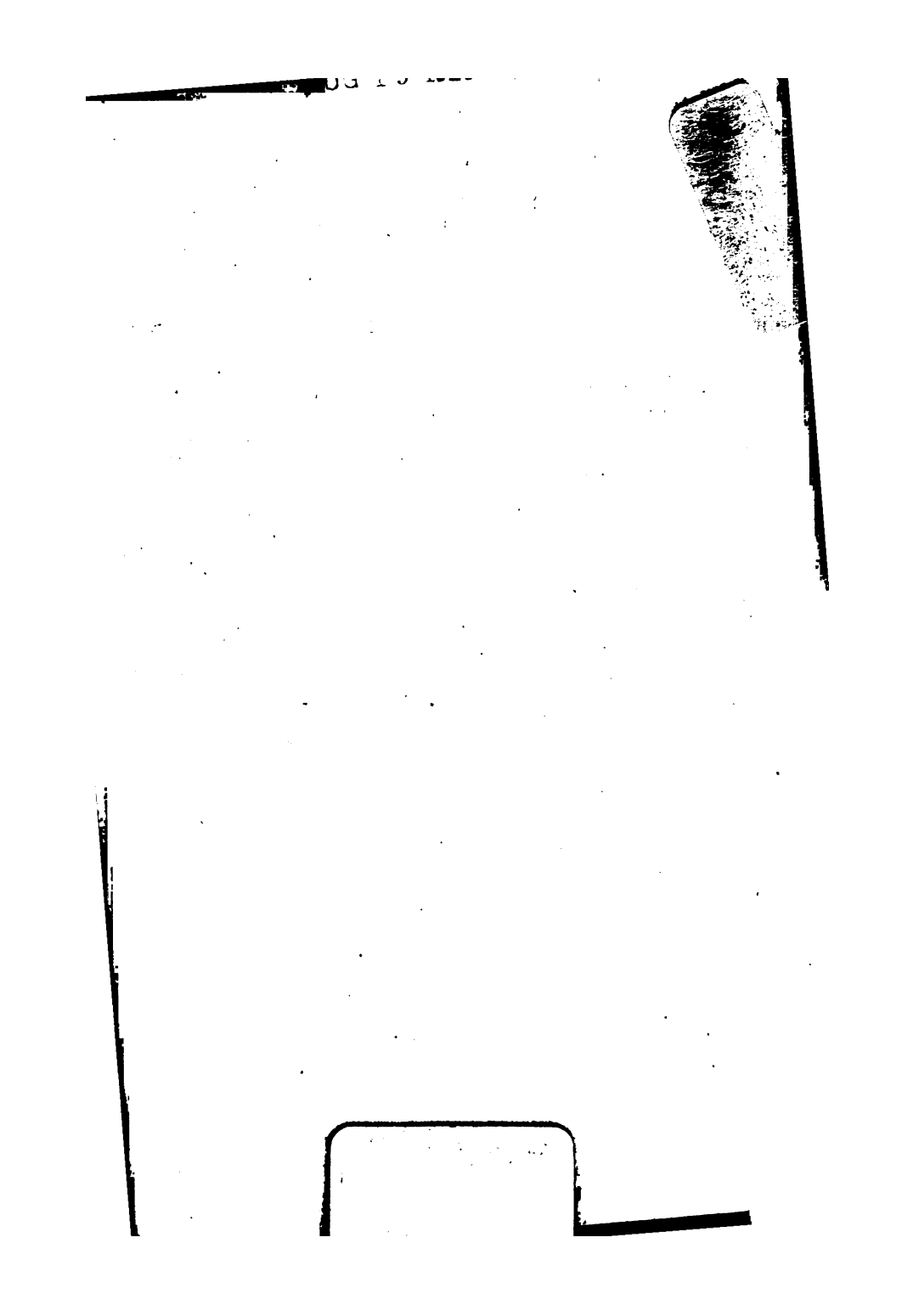
"My dear, I am very pleased, and I wish you every happiness," he said. "Once I would scarcely have trusted you to Lance, but he will forgive me, and has shown me that I was wrong. You and he will make Silverdale famous, and it is comforting to know, now my rest is very near, that you have chosen a man of your own station to follow me. With all our faults and blunders, blood is bound to tell."

Winston saw that Miss Barrington's eyes were a trifle misty, and he felt his face grow hot, but the girl's fingers touched his arm, and he followed, when, while her aunt signed approbation, she led him away. Then when they stood outside she laid her hands upon his face and drew it down to her.

"You will forget it, dear, and he is still wrong. If you had been Lance Courthorne I should never have done this," she said.

"No," said the man gravely. "I think there are many ways in which he is right, but you can be content with Winston the prairie farmer?"

Maud Barrington drew closer to him with a little smile in her eyes. "Yes," she said simply. "There never was a Courthorne who could stand beside him."

THE END

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